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SHOES OF GOLD

BY

HAMILTON DRUMMOND

AUTHOR OF "THE SEVEN HOUSES," "THE KING'S SCAPEGOAT," "THE CUCKOO," ETC.

LONDON

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SHOES OF GOLD

CHAPTER I

HOW SAINTONGE RAISED THE DEVIL

"COME, Saintonge, just a throw or two to pass the time," said Chauvelin persuasively. "Listen to their whisperings, the darlings! How can any man be deaf to such soft pleading? I declare I never heard so sweet a voice, not even in a woman." Rattling the dice gently, he dribbled them out upon the table. "Ace—trey! That's my vein of luck, and I'm a fool to play. But it is all so dull. Come, Saintonge, be *bon gars.*"

But Paul de Saintonge only shook his head, shook it slowly and regretfully. He was looking out of the window with his back to Chauvelin, his hands buried deep in his pockets; broad-shouldered, big-limbed, he looked almost a giant against the grey of the wintry sky.

"As you are so dull," he answered, without even turning, "would it amuse you to see the devil?"

"The devil? No, I don't think so. A dear little she-angel with fluffy wings, if you like. The devil does not interest me."

"Two devils, then?"

"Two? Yes, that would be uncommon. I never thought a man could see two unless he was drunk. And

I'm sober," he added plaintively. "I know I am. That is the worst of being on guard; you cannot even get drunk."

"Then I'll show you them. Are you ready?"

"Here? Now? You are talking nonsense, Saintonge."

But with a quick gesture Saintonge turned his pockets inside-out, leaving the empty pouches dangling.

"Here and now," he answered. "And not here and now only, but every day and everywhere I go. If these are not the very devil, what is? Nor is it any use to pretend agnosticism. There's not much faith left alive in Versailles, but even Voltaire believes in such devils as these."

There is nothing so easy as to be tolerant of another's misfortunes, and Chauvelin tilted back his chair, laughing. With a father Master of the Wardrobe, and the King's intimate, he could afford to be merry at such a jest as someone else's empty pockets. And hopelessly empty they were: not so much as a franc rolled on the floor.

"Is it so bad as all that? But, Saintonge, what about Laval? What about the uncle who could buy up half Versailles if he chose, and have enough over to bribe the rest?"

"What about next year's nuts? What about the fish in the sea? What about the bird in the egg? Yes, he could buy up half Versailles. I am sole heir to his golden shoes—he told me so himself; and meanwhile he allows me—how much do you think? Come now, Chauvelin, you know Versailles—the life to be lived; women, cards, dice; a little breakfast here, a little supper there; flowers, wine, and—and—all the rest of it. Now, how much do you think?"

"Gad! With your two demons staring me in the face I would suppose the worthy prodigal allowed you nothing at all, and was careful to pay it."

"Wrong! A hundred francs a week doled monthly! Think of it! Paul de Saintonge lording it at Versailles on five louis a week! He says he spends no more on himself, and therefore it should be enough for me. For me," scoffed Saintonge, scorn, anger, and contempt struggling for expression in his voice; "five louis enough for me, who could spend two thousand every month, and borrow for the last week!"

"Are there not children of Israel? All the tribes were not lost, thank God!"

"No Jews for me," and Saintonge shook his head with an emphasis very different from his reluctant refusal of Chauvelin's challenge. "I know my uncle. At the first Hebrew whisper he would disinherit me without compunction. He has told me so, and what he says he holds to, obstinate pig that he is! I'm his chattel, that's the fact, and I dare not cross him. No, no Jews for me."

"Then there's nothing for it but to praise God that the worthy man cannot live for ever. And the more he saves, the more there will be for you in the end."

"And while the grass grew the ass starved."

"Starved? Nonsense, Saintonge, no man can starve at Versailles."

"Can he not?" retorted Saintonge bitterly. "Is bread life? Are rags and a roof life? Has a man not a spirit as well as a body? Look at me," and he stood aside that the winter's light might fall full upon him. "My coat is a year old, my lace in tatters, my shoes patched; yes, by God, patched! And I a Saintonge of Provence! If a lackey wore such rags as I wear he would be kicked from the door. Everywhere I am laughed at, both behind my back and to my face, but with such a damned politeness that I cannot force an offence, and carve a hole in a better coat than my own. Polite? Yes, they are that! We are the politest people in the world, and have brought insult to a fine art. The men bow, smile, and stab you through with a jest you

cannot fling back with your sword; while the women —the dear women—laugh. What is all that but starvation? I tell you, Chauvelin, that I would stick at nothing, nothing. Why! it was only yesterday that Lauzun—the whelp is barely thirteen—said to Madame Pompadour in a half whisper, but so that I might hear —he was careful of that: 'Our poor Saintonge! I'm sure his heart is good.' 'Why?' asked she. 'Because, Madame, God is just and his coat is so bad.' 'Saintonge is a very fortunate man,' said that other cub, Guéménée. 'Why?' asked she again. 'Because, Madame, whoever marries him must certainly marry him for love.' Then all the women—what sweet, kindly hearts they have, these women!—clapped their hands, and d'Esparbès cried out that she must kiss them both for their pretty wit. And yet you say no man starves at Versailles."

"Oh, The d'Esparbès!" said Chauvelin contemptuously. "Who heeds The d'Esparbès? D'Esparbès' willing liberality in such things is well known. I believe she would rather kiss Monsieur de Paris than kiss no one at all. She is all sweet surrender. Perhaps she is vexed that you never captured the citadel?"

"In that, as in the fashion of my coat, I am also unique," answered Saintonge bitterly. "Don't mistake, Chauvelin, I'm no anchorite, and the blood in my veins is as warm as your own. But I would not share a woman's mouth with the King himself."

"Then we are agreed d'Esparbès does not count. But these others—Saintonge, why do you endure it all?"

"For what must come sooner or later. Wait till Paul de Saintonge is Paul, Count de Laval."

"But while the grass grows the ass starves."

"What else can the ass do but starve?"

"Join the army and live in clover. With Soubise in command the army must be the very paradise of asses."

"How can I?" Pausing in his impatient walk up and down the guard-room, Saintonge stood looking down

upon Chauvelin, his whole attitude one of protest. For a year he had endured in silence, but now the barriers were down and his bitterness of soul broke out in flood. A cloud darkened the grey of his eyes, and his shapely mouth grew thin in angry self-contempt. "My uncle will neither give me a life worth living nor leave to die. Do you think it is for pleasure that I endure the daily impertinences of a new-breeched boy like Lauzun—Lauzun, whom I could lay across my knee with one hand while I taught him manners with the other? A dozen times I have begged, prayed, for permission to join the army. But he is like flint. France has many sons, but Laval only one heir, he says, and bows as if all the dead Lavals of our race took off their hats to the sentiment. Then I threatened. I was my own master. If not with his consent, I would go without it and have a will of my own. The answer was a shrug and another bow. The day you set me the example, nephew, I shall follow it."

Chauvelin tipped the dice out upon the table, and in solemn pretence drank a toast from the empty box.

"To his worthy health! I wish I had an uncle of three hundred thousand francs a year who threatened to go to the wars——"

"You do not understand," interrupted Saintonge impatiently. "He meant that if I had a will of my own, so had he; but his was on parchment, and if I set his will aside, so would he. The King would be his heir. He has said so in as many words, and what he says he holds to. I told you before I am his chattel, and he does with me as he likes."

"The King! The unconscionable rascal!"

"His Majesty?"

"No, no; our excellent uncle. And yet, Saintonge, I think I would risk it. He cannot mean all he says."

"He means it, every word. I think he is the direct descendant of Darius the Mede, whose law altered not;

or of Balaam's ass, who would turn aside for nothing less than an angel!"

"Find the angel, Saintonge! There is the solution—find the angel."

"In Versailles? You forget my patched shoes. Angels do not love coats a year old."

"Then I would risk the army. He may live twenty years, and twenty years of five louis a week with Lauzun's wit as salt to their spending——" and Chauvelin broke off, shaking his head.

He and Saintonge were good comrades, friends almost, as such relationships went at Versailles in the worst days of Louis the Fifteenth. But wit was god, and what friendship could be expected to stand proof against the biting jests of which Saintonge was the daily butt? According to the prevailing code, a man had better die than be laughed at, and the one unforgivable sin was to be ridiculous.

"He may," answered Saintonge, turning once more to the window and staring out into the cold greyness of the January day. "But if there is no generosity in his heart, there is that there which may be quite as useful; he may die to-night—to-morrow—any day. Tronchin, who is his doctor, told me so in confidence."

"And you are his sole heir?"

"But at his mercy any moment! Now you understand why I will neither borrow from the Jews nor risk the army? So long as I am pliant, so long as I am his humble and obedient nephew, I am safe; cross him, even by a little, and—good-bye to the golden shoes! I dare not risk it, Chauvelin; nor would you."

"Dieu! What a gamble! Twenty years of poverty or three hundred thousand francs a year on the tick of a minute! Why, Saintonge, dice are play for babes compared with it! And yet you grumble that life is dull. Think of it, man, think of it! Every time you patch your rags—no offence, Saintonge, the word is

your own, and rags they are—every time you polish your patched shoes, every time you brush your worn coat—Gad! how it shines at the seams when one looks at it—it may be to fling them aside in an hour as Monsieur le Count, as Monseigneur Anything-you-choose, with every tailor in Paris knocking at your door, and half the women scrambling to climb in at the window."

"Why not all of them? What of the other half?"

"Oh, my dear fellow, thank heaven there is still some decency left in Versailles! The other half will be kissing good-bye to their lovers before they try their luck with you. Changed times, Saintonge!"

"Changed times, indeed!" echoed Saintonge. "Even The d'Esparbès will not look at me now."

"Oh, d'Esparbès! She is of the kind which sees no further than the hole in the coat. Gods! What a gamble it is, what a gamble; all the world and his wife—especially the wife, Saintonge—against worse than nothing at all! No wonder the dice have no attractions against such a stake as the world, the flesh, and the devil."

"Yes," said Saintonge sourly, and his face grew yet darker; "but what if you flung the dice every hour for a twelvemonth and lost, lost, lost, and might lose for twenty years? What then, my friend?"

"There are times when the only use a man has for a throat is to cut it," and again Chauvelin shook his head, but this time with a laugh. It was really quite amusing how serious life was for this poor Saintonge, whose pockets were empty. "But then," he went on, with the cheerful optimism of the looker-on at a losing game, "any moment the luck may turn, and this worthy uncle fulfil the whole duty of a man to his heir."

"So my friend the doctor said six months ago, and I have flung losing dice ever since."

"But the end is six months nearer. Meantime——"

"Yes, meantime?" repeated Saintonge, turning up

a patched shoe in eloquent illustration of the pleasures of patience as Chauvelin paused.

"Meantime I have an idea. Why the deuce did I not think of it sooner?"

"Because," answered Saintonge moodily, and speaking a deeper truth than he knew, "no one ever has ideas at Versailles until it is too late. I think it is the curse of the Court always to be too late. Will it be that the golden shoes, if they come at all, will come too late?"

"For heaven's sake, Saintonge, no politics! And, croaker that you are, this time it is not too late. Come, let us play."

Again Saintonge drew out his empty pockets, flapped them as a dog flaps his ears in fly time, and left them hanging. The dumb reply was more expressive than any bitterness of speech; in Versailles whoever lost, whether at play or in politics, had to pay to the uttermost sou, and he was already bankrupt. But, rattling the dice gaily, Chauvelin only laughed.

"You are a Jew of the Jews for unbelief, a very—faith! I forget—Moses, was it, or Aaron? No! I have it; a Thomas—a doubting Thomas. I will wager you a hundred louis——"

"Five months' pay! Why not say a million at once?"

"Because, Monsieur Thomas, I could not pay a million."

"As easily as I could pay a hundred."

"A hundred louis," went on Chauvelin, as if he had never been interrupted. "Neither to pay till you are Laval's heir. Come, Saintonge, you can't say no to that."

"What was that you said?"

"It is very simple. Neither pays unless and until you are your uncle's heir. That is the irony of it, and where the jest comes in. If you win, you gain nothing until the gain is no use to you. Gad! That's life itself, where all things come too late; life in a nutshell, with the

maggot gnawing the kernel. There's a thought for you ! I must be a philosopher without knowing it. Come, Saintonge, my throw first ? "

But the throw was never made. As Chauvelin waited, box in hand and rattling the dice softly, a servant entered.

" Monsieur de Saintonge ? " he said inquiringly. " Pardon, Monsieur, but Monseigneur the Duc de Choiseul desires to see you without delay in his private cabinet."

CHAPTER II

MONSIEUR DE RICHELIEU JESTS

"CHOISEUL?" said Chauvelin incredulously, the dice-box still suspended in mid-air. "There is some mistake. Are you sure it is not me he wants—Monsieur de Chauvelin?"

"Monsieur de Saintonge, the Duke said, and I was to make haste. It is no fault of mine, Monsieur, but already I have spent twenty minutes——"

"Well, you have found him now and can go," interrupted Chauvelin. "But Choiseul?" he added, the door being shut. "What the deuce can Choiseul possibly want with you, Saintonge? Something has happened, something—stop a minute! I have it. Laval! The worthy uncle has at last fulfilled the whole duty of man. Gad! I should like to see d'Esparbès' face when she hears the news!"

But Saintonge shook his head, nor did any flush of excitement cross his face.

"Tantet would have sent for me; we arranged all that. Come, Chauvelin, don't look disgusted. If you had lived the life I have lived these twelve months, if you had starved as I have starved, clenched your teeth and cursed with a smile on your face, cursed silently as I have cursed, you, too, would have arranged with Tantet for the first news."

"Who is Tantet?"

"My uncle's servant, and an old fool who loves Monsieur Paul in spite of Monsieur Paul's rags and patches. But there, he was not bred at Versailles."

"And yet," persisted Chauvelin, "something has happened, or why should Choiseul——"

"Something has happened indeed!" echoed Saintonge grimly. "For that fellow who brought the message was absolutely civil."

"Oh! They are not civil, are they not?"

"I don't blame them. They only copy their betters; and what man in Versailles, from King to trencher-washer, is mean enough to be civil to a coat like mine! Except you, Chauvelin," he added, as by an afterthought.

"H'm," grunted Chauvelin, "I was always a fool. But why Choiseul?"

"He is my uncle's friend, and it is through Choiseul's influence I have been a twelve-months' fly in the ointment, making the perfume of the palace to stink."

"H'm," grunted Chauvelin a second time. "I think if I were both Minister of War and for Foreign Affairs I would find some way of filling the pockets of my friend's nephew. It would be only following the fashion and cost nothing; in the end it is the people who pay for all. But since they are empty, these pockets of yours, Saintonge, you had better turn them back into their places again, unless—Gad! here's another idea. I'm full of ideas to-day—leave them as they are as a hint to the Duke! It wouldn't be the first time the devil had whispered in his ear!"

"No use," answered Saintonge as he thrust back the hanging pockets and opened the door. "The devil's out of fashion in Versailles—we are too polite to believe in him—and Choiseul never sees anything unpleasant. Besides, he lowers his eyes for one thing only—the face of a pretty woman."

"Always provided she is not the Duchess," called out Chauvelin, adding to himself as the door closed: "But Choiseul? Now, what the deuce can Choiseul want with such a stick as Saintonge?"

What ? That, too, was Saintonge's question, and if he had an answer ready it was that in his present mood he did not care what the Duke wanted. Dismissal, that spectre which haunts even the gay sunshine of a Court, would be welcome. For twelve months he had been a hanger-on, a burr upon the very hem of royalty, clinging to his place even when swept contemptuously in the mud. That was his uncle's doing, and as Saintonge reckoned up the flouts, the gibes, the shafts of bitter and merciless wit of which he had been the easy target in these twelve months, his fingers closed in upon his palms and he cursed his weakness behind shut teeth. Chauvelin was right ; he might have broken away, he might have joined the army and been a man among men instead of a butt for every cheap shaft of a ridicule he could neither prevent nor revenge. Yes, he might—but at what cost ? what sacrifice ? When a dead man's shoes are shoes of gold, weighted with three hundred thousand francs a year, they are worth waiting for. Let him once wear them, and those who had jeered him would find the gold was iron-heeled. The cost was too great. He hated poverty, he told himself, hated it, hated it, and for him there was no door of escape open but the door of his uncle's death chamber.

But dismissal ? What would his uncle, who had placed him at Versailles, say to that ? He knew how tender, how sensitive, how overweening, was the narrow Laval pride. Let it once take affront and, as he had said to Chauvelin, good-bye to the shoes of gold ! Affront ? Yes ! but it might as easily take affront at the King for dismissing the heir to Laval—Laval, who held himself to be as well born as any Bourbon. Certainly the King would then never wear these golden shoes, that was quite sure.

But supposing the Count flung the blame of the affront upon him—Saintonge ? And it was significant of how deeply the iron had sunken in his soul that he

could anticipate nothing but evil. That would be absolutely fatal—fatal. That made the King heir without a doubt. The King? Again Saintonge shut his teeth, and his handsome face lost its comeliness; after all, it is the spirit which gives flesh its beauty. Before the will could be changed at least a day or two must pass, and in that day or two, he told himself as he had told Chauvelin, he would stick at nothing—nothing. The King would never fall heir to Laval. What that nothing at which he would not stick really meant he did not pause to set bluntly before his mind; but the age was one of few scruples, and the cynic who said, "So long as you are opulent and bear a fine name everything is overlooked," only put into words the common practice. Nor had his twelve months at Versailles shown him a sin for which three hundred thousand francs a year could not win forgiveness. No! he would stick at nothing, and for the moment the devil was more humanly seated than in Paul de Saintonge's empty pockets.

Between Chauvelin's guard-room and the wing of the palace given up to the offices of the Ministers of State lay more than one long gallery opened into by many doors. With his hand upon the latch of one of these Saintonge paused. From behind it came the murmur of a gay babel, rising now and then to shrill laughter, or broken through by two voices which he immediately recognised. One, strong, clear, high-pitched, careless whom its self-assurance interrupted, was that of the boy Lauzun, already the spoilt darling of half the Court because of his audacious precocity; the other, no less vigorous, no less clear, was slow and precise. That was Richelieu, Duke and Marshal of France, who carried his seventy years as lightly and audaciously as Lauzun carried his thirteen.

Should he go forward or go back? Out of all Versailles these two were the most merciless in their derision, and yet against neither could he give passion rein.

Youth and the women's sympathetic laughter protected Lauzun ; while the old Duke's cynical sarcasm was so masked by an exaggerated courtesy as to allow no excuse for retaliation : that was Versailles in its most exquisite spirit—to stab bya jest and ruin a reputation with a smile.

But the debate was only momentary. Saintonge had his pride of race as had his uncle Laval, and now, though super-sensitiveness to ridicule was his weakness, it drove him to face the very laughter before which it winced.

Grouped before the fire, or lounging in pairs by the windows, was such a gathering as Saintonge knew well. Madame de Luxembourg, that irresponsible and capricious arbitress of social reputation, occupied the place of honour, sprawling back in her chair, her feet pushed out frankly to the crackling fire of scented wood, her silken petticoat well drawn up that their smallness might be admired. Over one shoulder stooped Richelieu, across the other leaned the Prince de Ligne. From these, as from the breast the arms, her court of dainty exquisites and perfumed dandies, more brilliant than the Queen's and second only to Madame Pompadour's, curved in a broad semicircle round the wide-mouthed grate. Every age was represented, from the smooth face of the boy Lauzun to the wrinkles of inexorable decrepitude, and every upward gradation of social rank ; officers of state who punctually performed their one duty of drawing an opulent salary, admirals who knew no seacraft, generals who never quitted Court or had commanded so much as a regiment, hangers-on every one, like Saintonge, but, unlike him, leeches who lived full-fed. Nor was the Church absent ; the more sombre dress throwing out in yet stronger relief the gay and delicate costumes of the women.

At Saintonge's entrance there was a break in the chatter and a rustle of silks as all turned to see who was the new-comer. In spite of their gaiety, or perhaps because of it, they soon tired of one another, and were

ready to welcome any interruption which added a new flavour to the frothed egg and sugar of life.

But, with a contemptuous, almost disgusted "Pooh! 'tis only Saintonge!" Madame de Luxembourg turned back again to the fire and pulled up her skirt yet another inch; though she had long passed fifty, her ankle had not lost its delicate turn. She was too great a lady to fly her wit at such small game, but Richelieu, at her side, stooped to her ear.

"He bores you, does he?" said he in a whisper, not so low but that it reached Saintonge as he crossed the room. The most polite court in Europe was at the same time the rudest and most insolent; perhaps it was the hardness of the heart below which took so bright a polish on the surface. "Yes? Then, dear lady, we must get quit of him once and for all. When one is bored one dies daily."

But the boy Lauzun had caught his cue. Interposing between Saintonge and the door through which he must pass to reach Choiseul's cabinet, he bowed with as deep a reverence as if to the King himself.

"Congratulations! Monsieur de Saintonge," he cried. "Warmest congratulations. But oh! poor Monsieur de Chauvelin!"

"Congratulations upon what?" answered Saintonge.

Scenting some bitter jest at their butt's expense, the quarter circle of which Lauzun had been part had promptly reversed and now, rounded behind the boy, barred the exit.

"Upon what!" echoed Lauzun, turning half round to the laughing crowd behind him, and speaking with an amazement so well feigned that some thought the jest was earnest. "Gentlemen, he has not heard of his appointment, and indeed, from appearances, I half suspected as much."

"Yes?" Richelieu minced forward with his dancing-master step. He, at least, was not deceived, and only

waited to see where the barb hit that he might press home the point. "What appointment? Tell us, Lauzun."

"His Majesty, who is our very good father——"

"And has such an unruly family, especially in petticoats. Faith, I have it! The King has made Monsieur de Saintonge Ambassador to China! God bless the King for his gracious thought—for us!"

"Fie, Marshal!" replied Lauzun as pertly as if he bantered his fellow-cub, Guéménée; he knew his Richelieu, and when he dared presume with safety upon the old Duke's acid temper. "That would be to bereave us of Monsieur de Saintonge's presence. Would you have the whole Court go into mourning for his loss? Now, this appointment is——"

"Yes; quick, quick!"

"Master of the Wardrobe!"

As Lauzun made his meaning clear with a significant gesture of the hand, those behind him, both men and women alike, broke into a titter of laughter.

"Dame!" said Richelieu, as it ended, "he who turns the spit can, I hope, take a cut from the joint for himself."

"If your jest is over, gentlemen," said Saintonge, schooling himself to a calmness belied by his flushed cheeks and angry eyes, "perhaps you will be good enough to let me pass. Monseigneur de Choiseul desires to see me, and, as you know, he does not like to be kept waiting."

"Jest?" echoed Richelieu tragically. "Child, child, can it be that you have presumed to jest with Monsieur de Saintonge?" Then his voice changed to kindly concern, and, ambling up to Saintonge, he drew out his cambric handkerchief. It was as delicate as that of a woman, and bordered three inches deep with lace. "Tut, tut!" he went on, flicking Saintonge's shoulder lightly, "this is very sad, very sad."

"Dust, Monseigneur?" said Saintonge, looking down into the wrinkled, mock-serious face pushed close to his own.

"No, Monsieur, no," answered Richelieu, still flicking vigorously. "Not dust, just blue mould, nothing but blue mould, mould everywhere. It seems a little out of place in Versailles. Do you not think so yourself?"

"Not everywhere, Monseigneur; were you younger you would find there was none on my sword."

"Were I half my age," retorted Richelieu, with a cackle, "it would make no difference. If you killed me the mould would still be there; and if I killed you, you would be mouldier than ever. There is only one cure, and I commend it to you—country air, Monsieur de Saintonge; try country air."

A brawl in the private rooms of the palace was, with Louis, the unforgivable sin, and those behind Lauzun, thinking the jest had gone far enough, drew aside, leaving a path clear to the door. But the boy, fists on hips and confident through long immunity, still kept his place. For once he presumed too far.

"By your leave, little one," and, taking him by the shoulder, Saintonge with a twist of his arm sent him spinning so that he fell, floundering, into Madame d'Esparbès' lap, his arms and legs all awhirl like the sails of a windmill. "Ah, Madame! what a misfortune!" he went on, bowing ironically. "Had he been ten years older, and the positions reversed, it would have been more to your taste!" and, chin in air, he left the room.

"Gad!" cried Richelieu, clapping his hands and laughing immoderately. "Who would have thought the fellow had wit in him, or the courage to use it? He cannot be such a fool as we thought. Madame, shall I call him back?"

But Madame d'Esparbès, too sensible of the old rake's power at Court to be affronted, shook her head.

"All the same, it's a pity Lauzun's jest is not earnest," she said with a sigh, "for he really is a fine figure of a man."

CHAPTER III

A MOVE IN DIPLOMACY

'MONSIEUR DE SAINTONGE! Monsieur de Saintonge! Do you know you have made us wait?" said Marcel, the doorkeeper, reproachfully. He was quite as much an autocrat as his master, and possessed of an even larger sense of personal dignity. "It is half an hour since Monseigneur sent for you."

"And ten minutes since I received his message. Is the Duke within?"

"Yes, Monsieur, and he has lost these ten minutes."

"Would you have me run *ventre à terre*, like a dog to a whistle?"

"Most men run, Monsieur, when the Duke calls them."

"Most men have something to gain by the running," answered Saintonge drily. "Give me good cause, my friend, and I will run like two dogs."

The minister was stooping over his desk, writing, when Saintonge entered, but at the announcement of his name he raised his head sharply.

"There!" he said, with a jerk of his quill towards a chair placed a yard or two distant from his own. "Marcel, let no one disturb me on any pretext so long as this gentleman is here," and, turning to his desk, he again wrote busily, but with little pauses, like a man trying over a sentence in his head, and shaping it to an exact nicety of meaning before committing the words to paper.

Left to himself, and ignorant of even a hint of what must pass between them, Saintonge set himself to study the minister as a man studies a strange opponent in a bout of swords. His person he knew well, as who in Versailles did not know the smooth, ugly face ready to wrinkle with laughter even at inopportune moments; the small, piercing eyes; the tilted nose; the thick-lipped, humorous, but loose mouth? These and certain tricks of habit were common knowledge, but what of the man himself? As if to aid his speculation Choiseul raised his head from time to time in the pauses of his writing and looked him full in the face.

At first this seemed the result of natural preoccupation, but at the second glance Saintonge was aware of a penetration, a scanning, which stirred him uneasily. It was as if he, too, was being weighed and measured, his points set down as a dealer checks off the points of a horse for which he bargains, setting the bad and the good one against the other. At last Choiseul threw his pen aside, leaned back in his chair, and wheeled it round so as to face Saintonge.

"I have promised my friend Laval to find you some work to do," he said abruptly.

"Thank you, Monseigneur," answered Saintonge, but without enthusiasm. "I have waited a year for it."

"That is not my fault. Your uncle stipulated for two things, and you know he is not a man who abandons a point. What he insisted on was that it should be work for France, and work which not everyone could do. In short, I was to give you your chance to serve the King as not every man could serve him."

"And it has come at last, Monseigneur, this chance you speak of?" Outwardly Saintonge was unmoved. To be unemotional was the foible of the age, but an alertness leaped to his eyes, and under his shabby coat his heart was beating a little faster.

"It has come at last. You are a fortunate young man,

Monsieur de Saintonge, the most fortunate in Versailles to-day. What I have to offer you is the chance of a lifetime. Only, remember, it is your one chance. Refuse it, and I am done with you and Laval is done with you; fail, and——" he paused, his eyes again appraising Saintonge from head to foot with a slow scrutiny which was not impertinent only because it was so passionless. "But you will not fail; you cannot unless you blunder egregiously, blunder stupidly, and for blunderers we have neither use nor forgiveness. Fools in worn coats don't rise, Monsieur de Saintonge; you understand that? How old are you?"

"Twenty-seven, Monseigneur."

"A glorious age, a charming age—in a man. In a woman, I don't say—but, no; women are charming at every age."

"Versailles knows you are a judge, Monseigneur," Saintonge could not help retorting. His uneasiness had entirely passed away. If it pleased Choiseul to be frivolous, he would be frivolous too! But the minister showed no offence; rather, his small eyes twinkled the more.

"Who denies it?" he answered. "And I say again I find them charming at all ages. But you, Monsieur de Saintonge—and this is important—are you in love?"

"Oh! Monseigneur, how could I be?" replied Saintonge, laughing, "when my only friend in Versailles is unmarried?"

"Which, of course, prevents you from following the fashion? But I am quite serious."

"And I too."

"That means you are heart-whole? No entanglements? no grand passion?"

"No, Monseigneur."

"None? Absolutely none?"

"So far as love is concerned, Monseigneur, I don't know one woman from another."

"Then, Monsieur de Saintonge, you must fall in love."

"Then my chance is to marry a fortune?"

"I did not say marry; I said, fall in love."

"In the service of France?"

"In the very serious service of France," replied Choiseul coolly, his eyes twinkling with a characteristic merriment which bubbled to the surface even in moments of extreme gravity. "And if the lady is a few years older than yourself, you must remember that, when all's said, a pretty woman has no age! Ninon de Lenclos' son fell in love with his mother! Besides, you may find some compensation in her rank."

"Oh! her rank?" echoed Saintonge helplessly. If it were not that Choiseul was Minister of War and for Foreign Affairs he would have said that another such little jest as Lauzun's was being played upon his impotency; but the Duke's trifling was of another colour. "What is her rank, Monseigneur?"

"To-day, Grand Duchess, to-morrow——" and Choiseul paused, his small eyes narrowing in a sudden doubt. He knew Saintonge's necessities—their pinch was written large before the whole world and patent to all; he knew his intolerable position at Court; he knew—none better—the supple morality of the age; but, after all, the man was a gentleman. He might have scruples: scruples as fatal as they would be ridiculous.

"Yes, Monseigneur? To-morrow——"

"She will be an Empress."

"Good Lord! What is this——"

"Duty, Saintonge, duty; and to fall in love is not so difficult, is it? Nor is duty always pleasure, or pleasure duty. But first, before I go further, promise me as you are a gentleman——"

For the second time that day Saintonge pushed out his patched shoe.

"Yes, Monseigneur; in spite of the evidence against

me, I think I may say I am a gentleman, as the word is understood nowadays."

"Then promise me that you will not divulge, except to the Count de Laval, what is about to pass between us; not even if you refuse my offer and—return whence you came a year ago."

"Then," said Saintonge soberly, for the Duke's pause was significant, "the alternative is either consent or dismissal?"

Choiseul shrugged his shoulders.

"The choice is yours; and there is no turning back, remember that."

"You have my promise, Monseigneur; on the word of a gentleman."

"Good! And believe me, Saintonge, this affair, rightly carried out, will mend more than your shoes." It was curious, but the very sense of honour which Choiseul distrusted, lest it should provoke a rejection of his proposal, was the quality upon which he relied for silence. "Next," he went on, "you are a good Frenchman?"

"Oh, a patriot, of course!" answered Saintonge ironically. "And, like the rest of the world at Versailles, I am eager to live for my country—and upon it!"

"A patriot," repeated Choiseul, ignoring the sneer, the set gravity of his voice a greater rebuke than any direct censure; "be sure I shall remember the word. A patriot, sir, is a man who sets the needs of his country first, and counts no loss a cost in her service. Now, Monsieur de Saintonge, attend to me closely, and remember that 'ifs,' 'buts,' and 'whys' are none of your business. In your mouth they are out of place. You are only a pawn in the game, and such words are for the brain that thinks and the hand that moves. For you it is enough that a long-threatened, dangerous political problem has suddenly become acute, and, take my word for it, that is true. France is on the brink of

losing the friendship of Russia, and the loss means war. Breteuil—you know Breteuil ? he is our ambassador in St. Petersburg; Breteuil writes me that the Empress is dying—already she may be dead. She was our friend, faithful, unswerving, staunch, and she hated Prussia. Her nephew, the Grand Duke Peter, who succeeds, worships Prussia with the blindness of a fanatic, and hates France for Prussia's sake. There is the situation in a sentence, and, Monsieur de Saintonge, you must change all that."

"I, Monseigneur ? What do I know of such affairs ? If Monsieur de Breteuil——"

"Bah ! Breteuil is a diplomatist and, of course, is distrusted; while you—in six weeks you will be his friend."

"I ? Whose friend, Monseigneur ? "

"Whose ? The Grand Duke's, the Emperor's. Saintonge, Saintonge, after all, is Laval wrong, and are you a fool ? "

"I ? " ejaculated Saintonge a third time. "I am to change all that ? But I am in Versailles, and it is the depth of winter."

"Winter ? Are you afraid of a little cold ? In a month you, or another in your place—I told you the choice is yours—will be in St. Petersburg."

"But, Monseigneur——"

"Silence, sir, with your buts. Did I not say I would have neither buts nor whys ? Take the facts from me, and say at once shall I go on with your instructions or not ? " While he spoke, his voice rising sharply, Choiseul half pushed himself from his chair with one hand, the other he poised above the bell placed on the table at the side of his desk. His small, penetrating eyes were sparkling with passion, and for once his thick lips had lost their habitual smile. "Am I to ring for Marcel, Monsieur de Saintonge, that he may open the door for you to return to oblivion ? "

"I was wrong," answered Saintonge, drawing back a little before the Minister's burst of anger. "If you will please to go on I shall not interrupt again."

"If it were not that the Count de Laval is my friend, and the King's friend, you would not have the chance to be wrong a second time."

"Monseigneur, I have recognised my fault; is that not enough?"

"Then in a month you will be in St. Petersburg, a young French gentleman of the provinces who is travelling solely for pleasure; your insignificance is at once your safety and your path to success. Here you have cut no large figure. Chernuishef, the Russian ambassador, will have written home no gossip about you; when you leave Versailles you will never be missed, and no one in Russia will suspect a gay young spark from Provence of being the centre of a Court intrigue. You will, of course, have explanatory letters to Breteuil and Roop."

"Breteuil I know, but—if it is permitted to ask—who is Roop?"

Choiseul paused almost imperceptibly before answering, and again glanced at Saintonge searchingly.

"I only know him by correspondence, but he seems to be a Russian patriot, as you are a French."

"A spy?"

"Um! a spy? No, I do not say that, not exactly. His position is hard to define. He is a Russian who, for his own purposes, is the friend of France. Just why, I neither know nor care. But a spy? No! The word is a hard one, and I would not recommend you to repeat it to Roop. The man is by way of being a gentleman."

"But, Monseigneur, and this time I am not raising difficulties, but asking information, or call it an amplification of instructions, what hope have I, a stranger who cannot speak the language, of gaining such a hold on the Emperor——"

But Choiseul cut him short with a quick negative motion of the hand. It was as if he said, You go too fast.

"French will serve you with those with whom you will meet; they pay us that compliment even when they hate us. As to winning the Emperor, tell me this, Who rules in Versailles? Come now, be frank."

"You, Monseigneur."

"Nonsense." But though the tone was brusque, the Minister's eyes twinkled with satisfaction; the flattery was not too gross for his palate, nor, in a sense, was it altogether flattery. "I said be frank. We are talking man to man, and for once free thought will be no treason. Come, who rules France?"

"The Pompadour."

"Find the woman!" and Choiseul grinned. "There lies your first step in social diplomatics! Now apply the principle to St. Petersburg. Gain the Empress, and in the long run you gain the only influence worth having. Peter? What is he but a bundle of vicious weaknesses, the last product of aristocratic decadence? *That* for Peter!" and Choiseul snapped his fingers. "He may get drunk and bluster, he may grow sober and weep, he may curse like one of his Holstein troopers, but—yes; gain Catherine—you may call her the Empress—and all's gained. She is a woman of a strong mind, and will lead the Czar like a sheep."

"But how am I to gain her?"

"How does any man win the confidence of a woman? Make love to her, Saintonge, make love to her. Breteuil says she is impressionable."

"I see," replied Saintonge slowly. "Make love to the wife, and in six weeks be the friend of the husband. Here in Paris the process is reversed, and it is the friend of the husband who in six weeks makes love to the wife. I fear, Monseigneur, I shall not succeed."

"Why not?"

"She is an Empress!"

"She is more than an Empress, and so again, why not? Shakespeare said of another,

> 'She is a woman, therefore may be woo'd;
> She is a woman, therefore may be won.'"

"But he said it through the mouth of a great villain."

"Shakespeare knew that to be a great villain a man must have a great mind," answered Choiseul, "villainy is only genius in deformity."

"Monseigneur, my mind is not great."

"Monsieur de Saintonge, I never thought it was, but you are too humble."

"Versailles has kept me humble for a year," he answered bitterly, "and in consequence I have lacked your opportunities, Monseigneur. I have had no practice in the part I am to play."

"We shall change all that when you have won the Emperor. After all, what have you to do? To sigh, look melancholy, mourn that your star is set so high above you that you may not reach it, and take care that she hears you mourn; brighten at a smile, gloom at a frown; fetch, carry, keep to heel with a dog's devotion. Faugh! It is the simplest A B C. And of what are you afraid? Look at me—ugly as the very deuce! You know what Duclos said? the scurrilous rascal! 'When Choiseul succeeds no man need despair!' Don't despair, Monsieur de Saintonge, don't despair."

"But, Monseigneur, you are the Duc de Choiseul."

"I am what I am," answered the Duke sourly. He did not relish that his success should be ascribed to his rank. "While you, six feet——"

"Six feet one, Monseigneur."

"Broad-shouldered, muscular as Hercules, more than good-looking——"

But the creaking of the door cut short the catalogue, and as it opened both started to their feet. "The King!"

cried Choiseul, and at a motion from his hand Saintonge fell back to the wall.

"Good-day, Choiseul," said Louis, bustling into the room with the impetuosity of a man whose every hour is overcrowded with imperative duties. "Marcel, shut the door. Why the deuce, Duke, do you work so hard? It fatigues me when I think of it. What are you at now?"

"Nothing of consequence, sir: I was only arranging that Monsieur de Saintonge should go a journey."

"Saintonge? What? Already? Hey! that is very clever of you. I shall tell Madame de Pompadour; it will please her greatly. It was only yesterday she said that even to look at Monsieur de Saintonge gave her the blues. We can't have that, you know. Where are you going, Monsieur?"

"To the south, sir," interposed Choiseul hastily. To have Saintonge's destination known at Court, and commented on in Chernuishef's weekly notes to St. Petersburg, might utterly ruin his project. "I promised Monsieur de Laval to give his nephew some small employment."

"Laval?" said Louis, seating himself in the chair Choiseul had vacated. "Laval? Surely I have heard the name. Who is Laval?"

"A very good friend, sir. We owe Monsieur de Laval much; it is through him——" and stooping forward Choiseul whispered in the King's ear.

"Yes, yes, of course; you are quite right, and I remember now. Why the deuce do I forget these things? Tell me that, Choiseul: why the deuce do I forget?"

"Oh, sir, you have so many things to remember."

"Gad, that's true; and that's why I'm here. That's why I left Amblimont, Voyer, and all that noisy crew behind me! I could not have them chattering here when I wanted to think seriously. Choiseul, this is most important."

"Shall Saintonge retire, sir?"

"Eh? No, let him stay; I don't mind one or two. Besides, he holds his tongue and lets me talk; not like these others. They have so much nonsense to say that I can never get a word in edgeways. Besides, they don't understand serious business. The thing is this—are you attending, Choiseul?—have you seen the new uniform for the bodyguard?"

"No, sir."

"I thought not," said the King triumphantly. "There's no one to see after things but myself. Well, the shoulder-strap won't do. What do you think they have done? They have put one strip of gold braid along the seam. But that won't do. They must put two strips—one on each side of the seam. Do you follow me? One on each side and touching in the centre. Hey, you understand? It's not right, Choiseul, that I should be left to think out these things. But you'll see to the alterations? Good, good. Now I must go back to these others, or they will be in some mischief. You can never tell for five minutes what foolish thing they may do when I'm not there to keep them in order. Good morning to you, Monsieur de Saintonge, and a good journey. I shall tell Madame, Choiseul, that I have recommended a speedy departure. She will be greatly pleased with us both," and quite ignorant of offence, Louis XV bustled away. It was the misfortune of his race to forget what should have been remembered, and remember what was better forgotten.

"I think that settles the question, Saintonge," said Choiseul drily, and reseating himself as the door closed. "To remain in Versailles is now impossible. Which is it, Petersburg or Provence? It is clear there is no middle course."

"Monseigneur, this is a scoundrelly project you suggest to me."

"Bah! Can you pick grapes and not soil your fingers? Besides, it is only diplomatic love, and the woman really is passable. That should make the pretence easy. I grant that protestations to a turnip on a meal-bag are—um—trying! But Breteuil is quite enthusiastic about her wit, and says she is almost good-looking at times. For the life of me I don't see where the hardship comes in."

"Still, Monseigneur, it is a scoundrelly thing. If I loved her there would be no more to be said. But what is the truth? I am to harp on a woman's vanity, pretend admiration, sigh devotion, hoodwink her credulity, gain her confidence by a lie——"

"I see you understand," interrupted Choiseul, "so we need say no more on that head. Only, I must be frank with you; you have no credentials. Breteuil and Roop will help you in every way they can, but you have no credentials."

"Then if I fail?"

"We wash our hands of you."

"If I compromise myself?"

"You do not compromise us; we wash our hands yet whiter."

"If, as is probable, I find myself in serious danger?"

"Get out of it as best you can."

"And there is a risk?"

Choiseul shrugged his shoulders, but there was no twinkle of levity in his eyes.

"Great rewards imply great risks. Peter is an autocrat, a law unto himself and above all other law. Draw your own conclusions."

"If I succeed?"

"We shall not be ungrateful."

"Am I to trust to the King's memory, or to yours, Monseigneur?"

"Good! I see you are shrewd," and the Duke laughed. "Trust me, and trusting me trust the King.

Believe me that the Saintonge who comes back with Russia's friendship in his pocket will be as different from the Saintonge of to-day as the butterfly from the grub; and you know we love butterflies at Versailles! The honey of every flower we have is theirs for the sipping. Now again, and for the last time, which is it, Petersburg or Provence?"

And Saintonge, goaded not only by the twin devils of his empty pockets, but also by the memory of the golden shoes which waited for him outside a creaking door, answered "Petersburg" as any other man of his time would have answered, and with but three seconds' hesitation.

Is he to be censured? It is given to few men to be better than the age in which they live, and let those who would cast a stone at him remember the social atmosphere he breathed. Nor was it altogether a question of a supple morality. Choiseul had not disguised the danger which lay hidden upon either side of the narrow primrose path he was asked to tread, and that very danger appealed to a spirit which Versailles had cramped but not crushed.

"Petersburg!"

"I knew it!" cried Choiseul. "There," and he tapped the half-written paper on his desk, "is my despatch to Breteuil announcing your departure. Of course, all this is my idea, and news to him. All it wants is the date! Now sit down and let us arrange details."

CHAPTER IV

THE DOMINANT WILL

"TANTET, why is my *tisane* not ready?"

"Because, Monsieur, it is still seven minutes to four."

"How often am I to tell you that it is four when I say it is four?"

"But, Monsieur, look at the clock."

"There were Lavals before there were clocks."

"But unless Monsieur Paul marries, there will be clocks when there are no Lavals," retorted Tantet. Of almost an equal age with his master, and brought up with him from childhood, Tantet, when the two were alone together, spoke his mind without hesitation and indifferent to rebuke.

"Then let him marry," replied the Count. "I do not say, let him find his equal in all things, for he is a Laval. But, provided she is French, wealthy, and of a good name, let him marry: these things I must have."

"And he is to find all these on a hundred francs a week?"

"Then let him not marry! I am not afraid for the Lavals. So long as there is a France the good God will give her a Laval. Now, obstinate pig that you are, surely it is four o'clock?"

"Yes, Monsieur, and there is your *tisane*. As to obstinacy, I am what you are: a good servant copies his master."

"I do not know why I bear with your impertinence, Tantet."

"So long as there is a Laval the good God will give him a Tantet!" answered Tantet coolly. "And—listen, Monsieur! Surely that is Monsieur Paul's step I hear in the hall?"

"Eh? What? No, I hear nothing. You must have ears like a dog."

"I suppose because I love like a dog," replied the valet. "I shall go and dry his coat for him. Rain, hail, snow, and a wind that blows the marrow from my bones, then whistles through them! That is Paris! Why did we ever leave Provence for this beast of a city!"

Left to himself, Laval slowly sipped his *tisane*. Its heat, and the aromatics of its pungent herbs, warmed his thin blood pleasantly. Tantet might grumble, as he did daily, at this beast of a Paris, but his master knew he would have grumbled yet louder had he been left behind in Provence. It was Tantet's nature to grumble, Laval told himself, the nature of his class. The people were always grumbling: it was born in them. Give them black bread and they would whine for white, give them white bread and they would whine for butter; there was no end to their grumbles. Even when they got what they wanted, as Tantet did in being near his Monsieur Paul, they grumbled all the same.

Now, he—and Laval rolled a mouthful of the hot decoction over his palate and swallowed it appreciatively as he turned his thoughts inward—never grumbled, just as he never worried. Why should he worry? The good God, he quite believed, would worry for him. So if a thing displeased him he simply bowed and said good-day to it; if he disliked a man, he turned his back on him and forgot him: for him that man no longer had an existence. That was the Laval way, and always had been; otherwise where was the advantage in being

the salt of a nation which was the salt of Europe which was the salt of civilisation ?

Paris ? He did not love Paris any more than Tantet, and yet he had come to Paris. That seemed to contradict his last thought. But no ! After all, what was Paris ? A place whence, after his own methods, he might launch another Laval upon his way through a really excellent world. Therefore in coming to Paris he pleased himself. Paul had not liked his method, but what of that ? There never had been room for more than the one Laval will at a time : always one Laval will paramount and answerable only to itself—always the rest obedient. And now there was only one Laval to obey—only Paul.

And Paul should marry. In that Tantet was right. As a matter of fact, Tantet was often right, but it would never do to let Tantet know his master thought so. It was a fatal mistake to allow his class—Tantet's class—to believe they could think even for themselves, much less for others. Mischief came of such people thinking : they should leave thought to their betters, and do as their betters told them without a hesitation or questioning why. That was the great Louis' way, and it was a good way. It is only those who think for themselves who want what they have not got. Beasts don't think and beasts are content ; really, the good God made beasts very admirably. Tantet's class should live on as their fathers lived, content with what contented them. Progress ? He disliked the word ; but if there must be such a thing, then certainly progress should be left to the Lavals.

But to go back on his thought—he called it his thought now, though it had been Tantet's ; that, too, was the Laval way—yes, there was no doubt but that Paul should marry. He must arrange that for him, and again he swallowed his *tisane* with a gulp of satisfaction, just as Paul was to swallow his choice of a wife.

She should be some girl of good breeding and with lands in Provence ; one who would say, Yes, Monsieur ; No, Monsieur, meekly, and bring Paul children ; that is, bring the Lavals children. Yes, Tantet was certainly right, and once Paul was fairly started upon this mission which Choiseul had found for him at last, he must search out such a girl. He would have five months, perhaps six, before him, and when Paul came back all would be ready. Of course, he would try and get a girl of passable looks, though they did not greatly matter ; Paul was too well trained to object. That was one comfort of their social system : there were no foolish whims or sentiments to consider. Object ? He should just like to see Paul objecting ; he would make short work of the objection and of Paul too ! There was only one Laval will, and it never changed. Tilting the cup, he drained the last of the *tisane*, and as he set down the empty vessel Saintonge opened the door.

" I have your permission to enter, Monsieur ? " he said, bowing respectfully. Whatever his private resentment at his uncle's niggard treatment, he was always careful to remember what was due to the absolute disposer of three hundred thousand francs a year in land and the possessor of a weak heart.

" Yes, Saintonge, yes ; but let Tantet go downstairs. We shall have something particular to say to one another, or I'm much mistaken. Eh ? What ? Have you seen Choiseul ? "

" But, Monsieur," protested Tantet from behind, and standing on tiptoe that he might look over Saintonge's shoulder, " why must I leave ? You know that as soon as Monsieur Paul has gone you will tell me all about it."

" Shut the door in his face, Saintonge, and come in. Why the deuce do I let myself be plagued with such an impertinent rascal ? "

Turning, Saintonge nodded across his shoulder good-humouredly. In Provence Tantet's devotion had been

as natural as daily bread, and had earned as scant thanks, but the bitter experience of the past year, with its flouts and scorns, had wakened a warmer appreciation. Love is never so truly valued as when it is lost.

"We shall have time enough, we two, for our gossip later on," he said. "Go, thou, and make a room ready for me."

"Then you remain with us to-night, Monsieur Paul?"

"Not only for to-night, but for three days, unless Monsieur kicks me out."

"No fear of that; or if he does, we shall go together, Monsieur Paul! That would bring him to his senses!" and Tantet bustled away. Three days of his beloved Monsieur Paul! three days of heaven, in spite of the wind, hail, and snow of this beast of a Paris. Tantet would not have been in Provence for all the suns of the south.

"Well, have you seen Choiseul?" repeated Laval impatiently. "Sit down, boy, sit down, I give you leave. A King's mission, he told me, though he gave me no details. Eh, Saintonge, that was worth waiting for?"

"I could wish, Monsieur, it had been more honourable."

"Eh? What is that you say? More honourable? Surely a Choiseul would never dare to ask a Laval—but it is for France, is it not?"

"Yes, I suppose I may say so. But to creep like a thief——"

"It is you who are squeamish. Nothing for France can be dishonourable. And who are you, sir, that you should dare to grimace at what I approve? And I have approved: understand that at once. I do not know what the mission is, but it is for France, and I approve. Understand another thing. You have your chance to show what stuff is in you. It was for this that I placed you at Court, that you might have your chance. If you

fail—well, I do not choose to have a fool for an heir. Is that plain ? "

" Yes," answered Saintonge slowly, and quoting Choiseul, " If I fail, you wash your hands of me. And yet—suppose the thing is impossible ? "

" Impossible ? You are a Laval ! "

" But you do not know what it is. It is to creep into a great household——"

" I knew it would be nothing bourgeois, nothing vulgar. Yes ? A great household ? "

"—and, pretending friendship, gain the love, or at least the confidence, of a woman——"

" There's nothing hard in that ; it's done twenty times a day in Versailles."

" —who is already a wife——"

" More like Versailles than ever ! See the value of your year's schooling. Was I not wise in my forethought ? "

" —in order," went on Saintonge steadily, as if Laval had never interrupted him, " that she may use her influence over her husband——"

" Gad ! There's more than Versailles in that ! It's their way all the world over. They can twist us, these women, round their fingers as they like—when they're young ! Is she young, Saintonge ? "

" The Empress of Russia is thirty-two."

Saintonge watched his uncle keenly as he replied. The more he considered it, the more preposterous, the more absurd, the more impossible, appeared his task. And yet its absurdity did not trouble him. What daunted him was its hopelessness and the consequences of failure. Preposterous ? Absurd ? What did that matter if it procured him release from the daily humiliation of Versailles ? But hopeless ? And through failure to lose his inheritance because of his uncle's wooden obstinacy ? " Fail, and I do not choose to have a fool for an heir. Is that plain ? " Even the bitterness of

Versailles, with its canker daily biting deeper, was to be preferred to such a danger, and he threw into his voice all the sarcasm of which he was capable, as if to say, Imagine the folly of it! But Laval was unmoved.

"Um! Then she is older than you are, and it is you who will do the twisting! But thirty-two? That is nonsense, Saintonge. Queens cannot choose their own ages like other women. Elizabeth must be fifty at the very least."

"But the Duke has information that Elizabeth is dying or dead, and this is Catherine. If she is not Empress to-day, she will be to-morrow."

"Oh! the little German? Then, you being a Frenchman, there is absolutely no difficulty at all. On my life, Saintonge, I don't see what you are grumbling at. Travelling will be a novelty, and Petersburg is even gayer than Paris. Of course, you will have money to throw about as you please; Choiseul will see to that, and so long as you succeed you may draw on me. Don't be niggard. You must entertain, you must bribe, you must play; and they play high in Petersburg, I can tell you."

"Then you do not object?" This side of his parsimonious uncle was an astonishment to Saintonge. He had been prepared for warnings and prohibitions, even threats. But there was no hint of any of these. There was rather an approval, an encouragement; nor could the fact that it was chiefly another man's money which would be squandered fully account for the frankness of the approbation.

"Object? There would be little use in that. And why should I object? Every Laval gambles like a madman till he is forty, then he saves as I do. It's in the blood. Your father's misfortune was that he died before the saving period set in, and so left you without a sou. Gamble? Bah! Up to forty a Laval would gamble on the number of hairs in the devil's tail! I

remember a wager we had, your father and I, whether you would be a boy or a girl—five thousand louis, and I won. Gamble ? Don't play the hypocrite, Saintonge —at least, not with me. Keep that for Catherine ! Come now, on the first of each month you received twenty louis, you who do not own twenty pence of your own : how many remained on the second ? Not one ? Of course not ; that is the Laval blood. Gamble ? Remember this, Saintonge, and let it keep your neck to the collar : You play now for a higher stake than any Laval before you, for, by God, sir, if you come back disgraced, if you come back a failure, I'm done with you ! When do you leave Paris ? "

" As soon as possible," answered Saintonge sullenly. " The fine bird must have fine feathers. That, like the travelling, will be a novelty ! " And for the third time that day Saintonge examined the patches on his shoe.

" Want creates appetite, and the sharper the hunger the keener the relish. Some day you will thank me," answered Laval. " Once in Petersburg, what then ? "

" I am to report myself to Breteuil and a rascal called Roop."

" Why a rascal ? "

" Because, being a Russian, he takes pay from France. I call him a renegade, a common spy : worse, even, for he betrays his country for hire. And, though the Duke uses softer words, is it not a shameful thing, sir, that I, a Saintonge of Laval, should be under the orders of such a rogue as that ? For that's what it means. I am to do as he bids me and ask no questions."

" Then do it, do it. Though the hand is dirty the tool is clean, and politics, like poverty, make strange bed-fellows. Who is that at the door ? Tantet ? Oh ! he may come in now. Tantet, Monsieur Paul leaves for Russia immediately, and will be absent six months."

Closing the door, Tantet crossed the room and took up a position behind Saintonge's chair, his round, smooth-

shaven face as unemotional as his master's, except that it lost a little of its fresh colour.

"Very good, Monsieur. And how soon do we follow?"

"We follow? What an old fool you are! Why should we go to Russia in the depths of winter, and at our time of life?"

"But, Monsieur, that is precisely the reason," answered Tantet, no wise abashed by Laval's contempt. "It is just because we are at our time of life that we must go, and as soon as possible. If we had fifty years to live six months might not matter much, but now that we both are old——" and Tantet, pausing, shook his bald head. "Now let us be happy while we can in the short time left us."

"Happy? In Russia?"

"Yes, Monsieur, why not? Monsieur Paul will be there."

"Saintonge, do you hear this madman?"

But Saintonge made no answer. Within the last few minutes a new idea, sprung from Tantet's assumption, had possessed him—an idea, it must be confessed, which did him no credit. Might not this preposterous project of Choiseul's, a project which threatened him with inevitable disaster, prove a friend in disguise? Surely, and while Tantet was urging his point with such direct simplicity, he looked across at Laval, the rigour of such a journey at such a season would—must—shake off from one so frail these golden shoes for which he waited, and in waiting endured so much? Surely—but the thought was an ugly one, and, though Saintonge had no love for the man whose heir-presumptive he was, he strove, not very successfully, to put it from him. If Laval chose to accept the risks he would do nothing to prevent him.

"A madman?" he repeated lightly. "But Tantet loves me, I think, and all love is a kind of madness, especially love for anyone as unworthy as I am."

"But not such a madness as a winter's journey to Russia!"

"I know little, nothing at all, indeed, of either," replied Saintonge, still lightly. "But if Monsieur de Choiseul is right I shall taste both before my return." Then, after the briefest of pauses, he added in a graver tone, turning respectfully to Laval as he spoke, "It is a pity, too, for my ignorance of affairs is colossal, while your wise experience and great knowledge of the world might turn failure to success."

"Gad!" and Laval sat up suddenly. "There is some sense in that; we must think it over, eh, Tantet?"

And Tantet had his answer ready:

"Let us do it first, Monsieur, and think about it afterwards."

CHAPTER V

THE NORTHERN ROAD

"I GIVE you a month to reach Petersburg," Choiseul had said, and for his first two days out from Paris, with the whole machinery of government at his disposal, the allowance seemed to Saintonge a generous one. At Lagny, Coulommiere, Esternay, and on to Metz, relays of horses were in readiness, with every official his obsequious servant, a novel experience after such a dog's twelvemonth as he had passed at Versailles.

It pleased Saintonge, too, that the valet Choiseul had found for him should see the high consideration in which his master was held. The man had joined the household the day before they quitted Paris, and though his coming was expected, their first interview had given Saintonge food for uneasy thought.

"You have travelled before?" he asked, looking up from the letter of introduction he was reading.

"Yes, Monsieur."

"You can valet?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

"Shave?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

"Wait table if necessary?"

"Yes, Monsieur; also ride, drive, shoot, cook—and mend clothes," he added after a pause, but with so much deference, and so stolid a face, that Saintonge was uncertain if he meant an impertinence. And yet,

to one who was as yet the winter-worn chrysalis, the remark was suggestive.

"Evidently a paragon!" replied Saintonge, "And I am much in debt to the Duke."

"His Excellency gave me very careful instructions, and I think I fully understand my duties. You will have no cause to complain, Monsieur."

"I hope not. By the way, what is your name?"

"Anton, Monsieur."

"Yes, yes; but unless you are a prince as well as a paragon, you have a second name?"

"Yes, Monsieur—Roop." Again there had been a slight pause, but there was no change in the voice, no significance of tone, no shift from the deferential level of a well-trained servant's respect.

"Oh, Roop?" echoed Saintonge lamely. "Well—yes—after all, I think I shall call you Anton."

"If you please, Monsieur," answered Roop respectfully, and the interview ended.

Roop? Which was it, coincidence or warning? A fortuity, or a deliberate avowal on Choiseul's part that, as he had said, there was no turning back, and that from first to last, even from the very gates of Paris itself, his every step was under surveillance? Hardly the former, for the name was not common, and if the latter it meant that the Duke was sufficiently convinced of his good faith, or perhaps of his necessities, to despise subterfuges. The fellow might have given a false name, and he, Saintonge, would have been unsuspicious.

But in that case, why not be yet franker and say, Here is a tool ready to your hand? The answer was as disquieting and inevitable as it was exasperating to his pride; in his heart Saintonge knew that of the two he was the tool rather than Roop.

But for these two first days of the journey his pride was soothed. Roop was respect itself, the post officials his very humble and obedient servants, the ordinary

travelling public as the mud flung aside by the wheels of his *berline*. They might grumble, these good citizens, they might even swear, but no matter how great their urgency, they must stand aside and wait while Saintonge rumbled on his way unimpeded. What rights can a mere tax-payer have compared with those of a tax-spender by divine appointment ?

Then, " The third day comes a frost, a killing frost, and—nips his root." At the frontier there was a change. After ninety years of alienation Germany still loved her lost Rhine provinces, and for their sake hated every Frenchman with a catholic hatred which admitted of no exceptions. From being of prime consideration, and seeing all others' convenience set aside for his advantage, Saintonge found himself sunk to the lowest point of neglect, nor, in his ignorance of any language but his own, could he even curse adequately. When it is desired to tear a gentlemanly passion to polite tatters, French serves admirably, but for hearty damning it lacks blood and bone. *Parbleu, Nom d'un Nom, Sac-a-papier*, fill the mouth, but neither soothe nor satisfy the angry spirit.

" Horses at once ! " he roared, and in reply the stolid postmaster flung a question at him, but went on writing without so much as raising his head.

" But it cannot be that you know who I am," cried Saintonge. " My need is urgent, do you understand ?—urgent—urgent, and already you have caused me ten minutes' delay."

This time there was no reply beyond an impatient wave of the hand, which so irritated Saintonge that, losing his little remainder of patience, he seized the fellow by the shoulder, shaking him violently, while he again loudly insisted on having his needs supplied.

The success of the manœuvre was instant, but not such as Saintonge desired. With a growl the man flung open the door and shouted, but in place of the expected

driver a soldier entered, and for five minutes there was an energetic pantomime which convinced Saintonge that he was much nearer a guard-house than the inside of his *berline*. But, having abased the Frenchman sufficiently, the soldier withdrew and the importunity recommenced.

This time Saintonge played the card which had won precedence for him all the way from Paris—Choiseul! played it with an air of contemptuous superiority that would have done credit to the arrogant impertinence of a Richelieu. But it failed and failed miserably. With a splutter the fellow blew out his cheeks, and if Saintonge rightly guessed the snarl which followed it was, "Damn Choiseul!" A sentiment his own perplexed vexation was heartily willing to echo. Damn Choiseul! But what did the Duke mean by flinging him under the feet of such a swine's contempt!

And yet it was Choiseul who, by proxy, rescued him from his dilemma.

"With your permission, Monsieur?" said Anton from the doorway, and, not waiting for a reply, plunged forthwith into fluent German. "There will be horses in five hours, he says."

"But I cannot wait five hours. Monsieur de Choiseul said I must——"

"Your pardon, Monsieur, but we leave 'musts' behind us at the frontier," interrupted Anton with much respect, but with very little ceremony.

"But I tell you the delay is much more serious than you can possibly understand. Monsieur de Choiseul was very urgent——"

"Your pardon again, Monsieur; but, if I might advise, it will be well to say nothing of Monsieur de Choiseul's urgency. It might seem strange, might it not, that a gentleman of Provence, travelling for pleasure, should quote Monsieur de Choiseul and his urgency at every sentence."

"When I want your advice I shall ask for it," replied Saintonge tartly.

"Yes, Monsieur. As we are to be here five hours, shall I order dinner?"

"Oh! Order what you like and be hanged!" and Saintonge flung out of the room in a rage, the edge of his vexation all the sharper because he realised how fully justified was the rebuke.

Thenceforward he was more discreet, and, though the state of the roads was no respecter of Ministers for Foreign Affairs, Anton's tact and experience prevented unnecessary delay. He bullied, bribed, cringed, wheedled, hectored, or lied without scruple as occasion demanded, and compelled Saintonge's grudging admiration by his readiness of resource, his shrewd foresight, and imperturbable temper. To his master his respect was unfailing both in public and in private, but through the respect there was a subtle hint of authority which served as a constant chastener to Saintonge's rising complacency.

And that his complacency should rise was to be expected. With perfect health and a full pocket it is impossible for twenty-seven to be long false to natural optimism: the mercury must rise when the sun shines upon it. It is the blessing of wholesome youth that it must, and will, assert its privileges; and Saintonge, though tainted by the cynical morality of his time, was still wholesome in mind and spirit. At Versailles his very poverty had been a protection. A looker-on at the game of life, riotous and decadent by turns, rather than a partaker in its excesses, the pageant had seemed to him more a masquerade than a reality.

But there could be no mistaking the realism of his own tingling vitality, and had it not been for Anton Roop even Germany in bleak winter would have been the best of all possible worlds. There was life that was living, no mere players' artificial pretence, there was

variety, there was freedom—three things which were strange to his cramped possibilities, and under their influence he was able to forget that he was nothing more than the catspaw of a disreputable intrigue. Then came Anton Roop with his smooth, but suggestive, respect, and lo ! in an instant the month was January, the skies grey with a threat of sleet, the roads mired to the ankle, and he himself a worthless pawn to be flung aside without pity at the first false move. In that, at least, Choiseul had been frank, brutally frank, and, lest Saintonge should forget the threat, there was Anton Roop to remind him hourly.

For a young gentleman of Provence, travelling for pleasure, Saintonge dallied but little by the way, and sought none of the amusements congenial to the maker of the Grand Tour. By Anton's advice he avoided the larger towns, and with every degree of northing they made, Anton's advice, respectfully hinted, became the more necessary. When possible, he travelled by night as well as by day, with Anton sleeping in the opposite corner of the *berline*. But horses were not always procurable for night journeys, or the dangers of the road were prohibitive ; and then out of a full heart Saintonge cursed Prussia, Poland, Russia, and Choiseul separately, collectively, and without prejudice, so miserable was the choice between being half frozen in the unwarmed public room of the posting house, or claiming a share of the landlord's quarters where men, women and children, dogs, fowls and cattle, all huddled round the stove, seeking warmth in a common filth. To have possessed his soul in humiliation, waiting with patience for his golden shoes, would have been happy by comparison.

But, while the Russian frontier was still more than a hundred miles distant, there came a change in a single night. For ten hours snow fell, and the morning broke to a keen frost sparkling under a sky almost as blue as

that of Provence in summer. Thenceforward the heavy, lumbering *berline* gave place to the sleigh, the rate of speed doubled, and the ignominy of the ditch, tasted almost daily in the past, was no longer imminent. So bitter-cold was the air that Saintonge was driven to wear a mask for protection. But the brisk tonic stirred his blood pleasantly, nor did his spirit sink under the burden of anticipation when, from the seat behind him, Anton touched his shoulder, pointing forward with the other hand where the flat of a frozen river lay between stark woods.

"The Dvina, Monsieur, and—Russia!"

"Russia! Then how many days to Petersburg?"

"Perhaps eight, perhaps ten or twelve, according as the roads are good or bad. But if I might advise——"

"Yes? Why not finish? If you might advise? I know what that means," replied Saintonge impatiently as the valet paused. "But understand this, my man, for it is time I made it clear, now that we are near the end of our journey; neither now nor later will I take your advice unless it pleases me."

"Of course not, Monsieur. Are you not travelling solely to please yourself? And are you not master? But, all the same, to remain two or three days at Dolgoburg would be wise."

"Why at Dolgoburg?"

"It is a convenient place, Monsieur, at the junction of the Moscow road."

"That is no reason: the Moscow road is nothing to me. And why wait two or three days?"

"For news, Monsieur."

"News of what?"

Anton Roop paused a moment before replying, his firm, well-shaped mouth growing a little firmer.

"News of the Court, Monsieur. It may be at Petersburg, or it may be—elsewhere."

"What is that to us?"

Roop shrugged his shoulders.

"To me—nothing: I am paid my wages."

"I see," said Saintonge slowly; "and I have no doubt you will earn them, as you are earning them now. And supposing the Court is elsewhere, what then?"

"Oh, Monsieur, that is for you to say: you are master."

"I see," repeated Saintonge. "Roop, it seems to me it would be well if we understood each other better. Eh?"

But a twist of the sleigh, as it rounded a curve of the road, jerked Roop back again to his seat, and he made no answer.

CHAPTER VI

THE GUEST-HOUSE AT DOLGOBURG

ALTHOUGH the village of Dolgoburg was a mere cluster of mean houses, for the most part little better than huts, and occupied by the peasants tilling the surrounding soil, its posting station was the largest and best appointed Saintonge had met with since leaving Prussia. This was in part due to its proximity to the capital, and in part to the fact that at Dolgoburg, as Roop had said, the Moscow road joined the southern route to St. Petersburg.

Between these, the two greatest centres of population in Russia, the stream of travel was steady, and if in winter it dwindled to a trickle, those composing it were chiefly of a quality impatient of personal discomfort. Had the guest-house of Dolgoburg been a day's journey out of Paris, Saintonge would have poured the acid of his satire upon its thick walls, its dim light, its lumbering stoves and yet more lumbering furnishings, all so uncongenial to the Frenchman's lighter vein. But his weeks upon the road had taught him tolerance, and even to Anton Roop he admitted that the three days' delay for which the valet asked would be no hardship.

Nor was it his intention that these three days should be wasted. Though Anton Roop had not replied to his question, nor had Saintonge repeated it at the time, he had all along determined not to leave it unanswered. With each day it had of late become clearer and clearer

that for his own safety a better understanding was absolutely necessary, even if, for the moment, he left the success of his mission out of sight. To diplomatists there are always two methods open—the clandestine, which they call subtlety, and the direct, which they do not love because the cunning, though more real, is less apparent. Saintonge, being new at the business, had essayed the latter and failed; now he determined to fall back upon the former. If Roop would not be frank with him when approached by fair means, he might if foul were used; and if he kept silence sober, he might speak the truth while drunk; nor was it probable that any place would suit Saintonge's purpose better than the guest-house of Dolgoburg. It was but a resting-place for birds of passage, and few who arrived at night remained beyond the next morning.

His plan had the merit of extreme simplicity, and in dealing with a man as subtle as he believed Roop to be, simplicity was his wisdom. In deceit the half truth is safer than the whole lie, and this was half the truth. He would feign such weariness of himself that, failing the society of his equals, he condescended to drink with his valet, and the rest should be easy. He had two allies to assist his plot—Roop's ignorance of his purpose, and a head which had kept cool through many a drinking bout at Versailles, and a man who can remain sober when it is a merit to get drunk should surely keep his wits in his own interest! Besides, he need only appear to drink, while carefully seeing to it that the other drank in earnest; then, by seeming more drunk than his servant, he would lead him on to such admissions as would give the clue to Roop's relationships both with the Minister of State and the spy of France.

It was an ignoble, a contemptible contrivance, but in these last days of a corrupt society, and a yet more corrupt Court, honour had fashioned for itself a new code: old standards were swept away, and a man might stoop

to any vileness provided he was ready to vouch his conduct with his sword. But the question of honour or dishonour did not trouble Saintonge. Conscience, that candid friend, was but a rudiment. If rudiments can speak and it spoke at all, it was in baby-language hardly to be understood. In this, he told himself, he was only fighting Choiseul with his own weapons, deceit with deceit, subterfuge with subterfuge, trick with trick, and his one anxiety was not the righteousness of his plot, but how to carry it through successfully.

That his ennui might seem the more natural he made no move until the afternoon of the day before they were to leave Dolgoburg. Then—such are the cross-currents of life which drift men into eddies and whirlpools upon which they have taken no thought—when he searched for Roop, Roop was nowhere to be found; nor was it till the sun had set, and the lamps were lit, that the valet appeared.

The one guest-room of the inn was a gaunt, almost four-square apartment, absolutely void of all suggestion of refinement. One long table extended up the centre, four others, smaller, were placed with mathematical precision one in each corner. At one end double doors for conservation of heat, and separated by a small landing, opened upon the road; at the other was a huge fire given over to cooking operations. Above and at either side of the open fireplace pots, kettles, and frying-pans were suspended, and the air was heavy with the smell of savoury stews. Clumsy benches lined the tables, and the one note of comfort was in the fur rugs strewn upon the floor. A cresset lamp attached to an iron chain hung in front of the open fire; two other lamps upon brass stands stood on the centre table.

Taking one of these, Saintonge placed it upon a smaller table in a corner near the door, and ordering wine, seated himself with his back to the wall to wait for Roop. When at last he came, he brought with him a

condonation for his absence by opening an easy way through which Saintonge might approach his object.

"We may leave Dolgoburg to-morrow, Monsieur."

"May? We shall! Whosoever said man was not made to live alone told the truth. I am utterly bored with myself, and tired to death of this dull hole where there is not a soul to speak to the whole day long."

"I mean, Monsieur, that news has come from St. Petersburg."

"What is Petersburg to me? If it were news from Paris I could say thank you! But, after all, perhaps Petersburg is better than nothing, so get a glass for yourself, Roop, and tell me all about it. God be thanked for christian burgundy in this barbarous country: a man may at least amuse himself getting drunk!"

For a moment Roop stood irresolute. Saintonge had to deal with a cleverer, or at least more cunning, man than himself, and his change of attitude was at once apparent to the valet. But the cause of the change was not so clear, and as Roop turned away to do as he was bid it puzzled him to find an explanation. For weeks, from the very day they had crossed the frontier, if not even from Paris itself, Saintonge had held him at arm's length, accepting with a grudging resentment the assistance his helpless ignorance of the people, their customs and language, could not dispense with. At times the toleration had been cramped to discourtesy, that insolence which a master can show a dependent, with as raw a galling as a servant can show a master. Now, with a reversal as abrupt as a turning on the heel, it was, "Roop, sit down and drink!" Why was that?

"Bring a tumbler, Anton," called Saintonge after him; "these small glasses are an insult to good wine, and I am nearly a bottle ahead of you. Sit down, sit down, man," he went on testily, the native grain of his antipathy breaking through the overlaid veneer of courtesy, as the other returned. "Don't stand there shuffling

your feet like a country lout in a show-booth. Come, a toast! Is your glass full? Empty it, then. Here's to success!"

"To success!" echoed Roop, doing, like a good servant, what his master bade him. "But to success in what?"

"Pleasure," answered Saintonge. "For what else did I leave Paris? Roop, you know Russia well, I suppose?"

"As I know Spain or England, Monsieur, almost as I know France, that is to say, like an old glove."

"Then you have friends here? relatives, perhaps? Eh? Is that so?"

"Whoso has a purse is my friend till it's empty, not only in Russia, but wherever I go; and we all call the Czar father," answered Roop, careful to let slip no information, and yet speaking with an airy frankness. "They know good wine from bad here, Monsieur, dull hole though it is."

"Passable, when one has drunk enough to stale one's palate. And so, except the Little Father, you have no relatives in Russia?"

Lifting the bottle, Roop slowly filled his glass, raised it slowly to his mouth, and as slowly drank the contents. One would have sworn he was rolling the wine over his palate like a connoisseur. Then, while he still drank, a posthorn sounded without, and glass in hand he sprang to his feet.

"Someone is coming, Monsieur."

"Well, let them come; that is the landlord's affair, not ours. And here he is to answer for himself."

"But, Monsieur, the presumption on my part? Strangers will misunderstand your condescension, and your dignity will suffer."

"Sit down when I bid you," said Saintonge curtly. "Who the deuce will know you are a valet of Choiseul's choosing? And whoever comes into our life to-day

goes out to-morrow! Women, my faith! Mistress and maid, I reckon. Presently, Anton, like the clever valet you are, it will be your business to find out their names and all about them. My faith again! but she is charming, now that her veil is lifted."

"She may not be pleased to hear you say so," answered Roop, lowering his voice, a precaution which Saintonge had not observed.

"Nonsense! You to whom Russia, England and Spain are as familiar as an old glove should know that women are the same all the world over, and never resent pleasant truths. Whoever heard of one who objected to be told she was good-looking; and Mademoiselle—I hope she is Mademoiselle—is more than good-looking, much more. Besides, it is ten chances to one the pretty barbarian speaks no French. Why the deuce can't I talk Russian, that I might make sure she understood!"

"And have that big servant of hers pitch you into the snow?"

Saintonge laughed in entire good humour. The wine he had drunk had warmed him pleasantly, and that Roop should forget his respect in a retort argued well for the success of his plot: undue familiarity and incaution are first cousins.

"He might, or he might not," he replied carelessly. "I am a match for most men. But in any case I never quarrel with lackeys. Here's to the little witch's health. A bumper, Roop, a bumper. If only she is going to Petersburg to-morrow I will give Choiseul my blessing and pardon him for a dog's month. We'll scrape acquaintance on the road, she and I, and thank goodness a woman's eyes do not talk in Russian."

"Whoever comes into my life to-day goes out to-morrow." Hardly a week passes but consciously or subconsciously we use Saintonge's words. And yet the truth is that if the coming in be like the coming of the

spirit, without observation, the going out, if there is a going out at all, leaves a scar behind. In the contact of human lives there is no such thing as a purely negative influence. If the meeting streams diverge, each leaves the other the clearer or the muddier for the contact.

CHAPTER VII

FELLOW-TRAVELLERS

OF the three who had entered two were women, and it was soon evident that Saintonge's guess as to their relationship was correct. Both were dressed in furs, and had their faces covered with lined silk masks under their veils as an additional protection against the extreme cold; but while one gave orders to the landlord the other stood aside as if waiting directions. Behind them, carrying two heavy skin rugs over his arm, was a burly, red-bearded peasant whose breadth of shoulder amply justified Roop's sneer.

Throwing back her veil, the girl unloosed the strings of her mask, and this time it was Saintonge who was justified. Probably he would have found it difficult to put his justification into words. She was charming because she was charming, and in coming to that decision he had waited for no analysis. And he was right. To analyse a woman's charm is as futile and as thankless as pulling a rose to pieces to find the perfume. It is not altogether in the individual petal, and yet each petal has gone to its making. So was it with the girl beating the dust of snow from her skirts in the gaunt hall. The charm was neither in the broad forehead, with its drifted wisps of fair hair escaped from the contracting veil, nor in the quiet grey eyes; not in the rounded cheeks frosted to a delicate beauty, the full, firm mouth, nor the steadfast chin. These were the petals of the

rose, but the perfume lay in the full flower, in the freshness of the face, strong and sweet and womanly, in the shapely grace of mould which not even her heavy furs could entirely hide, in the whiteness of the long-fingered hand withdrawn from its glove, in the erect poise of the head and the carriage of the slender, supple body. The charm was in all of them, and all went to its making.

After the first unconscious glance round the room she had no eyes but for the waiting landlord.

"A room for myself and my maid?" she said, interrogatively, speaking in Russian.

"Certainly, your Excellency; a most admirable room with the stove already heated in anticipation——"

But she cut him short.

"And for Dmitry, my servant?"

"There are quarters for the men at the other end of the house."

"At the other end of the house?" From Russian she suddenly changed to French, raising her voice slightly and speaking with a fluency which never paused for a choice of word. "Lay our supper in that far corner. Of course, you have servants here to keep order if necessary? Oh, no protests! Your house is a good one, I know, and well conducted, but drunken brawlers are possible everywhere, and must be kept in their place. Now show me my room, and let supper be ready when we return."

"This way, your Excellency," answered he, opening a door midway down the length of the room. "It is up these stairs, and then back again to the end of the passage. As to annoyance, your Excellency may rest assured——" and his voice died away in a hollow rumble as he and the travellers vanished.

"You see, Monsieur?" said Roop, not without satisfaction.

"I see and I foresee," answered Saintonge. "Wait till to-morrow, and thou shalt also see. The Garden of

Eden had but one kind of clay, and I have not lived my year in Versailles for nothing. Here's to our closer acquaintance! Drink, Roop, you scoundrel, drink to two grey eyes and a mouth made for kissing, and then tell me your news. But who would have supposed she spoke French!"

"And where would be your pleasure travelling in Russia if she and her class did not speak French?" answered Roop. "As to news—the Court is at Petersburg."

"The Court? It seems to me, Anton, that you know a great deal about courts! First, Choiseul chooses you in Paris, next you advise me to avoid Potsdam because Frederick is there, now the Court is at Petersburg. One thing I'll tell you: at no Court will you get better wine; no, not from the Well-Beloved himself. Roop, here's to his health in a full glass! On your legs, man, on your legs, when you drink to the King!"

"But, Monsieur, with so many healths I shall get drunk."

"It's an amiable weakness, and I'll forgive you, just as the pretty Mam'zelle will forgive me to-morrow for a weakness even more amiable. Here she comes, and, praised be heaven, the figure matches the face. I guessed as much, though my heart was in my mouth in terror of a disillusion. Under these furs she might have been either a vine-stalk or a meal-bag, but as it is—Roop! we'll drink to her figure! Last time it was to her charming face. Nor is the maid so bad now that one sees her in the light. That is lucky for you. You dog! While I make love to the mistress it will be your duty to kiss the maid, and, my faith, I do not pity you."

"But, Monsieur, is it wise? Did we come all this distance in winter to make love to the first woman we meet? What will they say at Court?"

"Love and a pretty woman are always wise in combination. And does it matter what they say at Court?

A gentleman of Provence, travelling for pleasure, must take his pleasure where he finds it. Why the deuce, Roop, should I care what they say at Court ? "

Aided by the stifling closeness of the room, the wine Saintonge had drunk had warmed his brain, and it was with an effort he controlled the growing looseness of his tongue. So far, he told himself, he had played his part well, so well that a glow of satisfaction almost drove him to overplay it. But he recognised that unless he was to give, instead of receiving, he must be careful. But as Roop returned no answer he repeated the question at the risk of a too obvious importunity.

" The Empress is—um—what shall I say—tolerant ? Tell me, Roop, why should I care what they say at Court ? "

" Because," replied Roop slowly, " the Empress, for all her tolerance, may not care for second-hand goods."

" Faugh ! Roop, you are vulgar."

" I speak after the manner of my class, Monsieur, and the use of words is to tell the truth."

" Then, Roop, you misuse them sorely at times. But what is it to me what the Empress cares ? "

" Nothing, Monsieur." And again there was a hesitation, almost a pause. " But I understood that Monsieur de Laval was very rich."

" Monsieur de Laval ? " In his anxiety to probe the heart of Roop's knowledge Saintonge had forgotten the stakes for which he played, and at the sudden use of his uncle's name he winced visibly. " Roop," he went on, stammering, " how is it—why—what do you mean ? What has Choiseul told you ? "

" To be faithful, Monsieur."

" Yes ; but to whom ? To Monsieur de Choiseul or to me ? "

" To my master who finds me my wages," answered Roop.

The reply was ambiguous. If the hand which paid

was the hand of Saintonge, the purse into which the fingers dipped had certainly been filled by the Duc de Choiseul out of the pockets of France. To which was Roop faithful—to hand, purse, or pocket? Saintonge could not decide, and another diversion from without came to him as a relief from embarrassment. Thin and clear through the frosty air, but louder and nearer with every blast, there once more blared the note of a post-horn.

"From Petersburg!" said Roop, and, turning in his seat, he faced the door.

Again the travellers were two in number; but this time they were men, and if there was not the same avowed divergence in social position as that of mistress and maid, one evidently claimed and was granted a precedence.

This was a man of great height, compared with whom Saintonge, tall as he had boasted himself to Choiseul, was at a disadvantage. Wrapped in his furs his size was enormous, and as he stood shaking the particles of snow off his shoulders, as a dog shakes water from his coat, he resembled nothing so much as a bear strayed from the dense woods of birch, pine, and oak which lay to the west of Dolgoburg.

"Supper! Supper!" he cried, stamping his feet noisily. "B-r-r-r-h! but it is cold! There's a wind outside which cuts like a thousand razors. Where is Michael? Michael! Michael! Oh, here you are!" he went on, as the landlord came in at a trot from the direction of the servants' quarters, and, shifting from Russian, to speak in very dubious French. To those who understood the change was significant of the cleavage between the two parties at Court: had he been an adherent of the Emperor he would have attempted German, though he knew but two words. "Supper, Michael, supper; and bring in three bottles from the bin in the right-hand corner, two for me and one for—

my friend here. After that, since your house is so empty, a room apiece."

"Supper at once, your Highness. Though what I have ready is hardly fit to set before your Excellency. If I had but known your Highness was coming, I think I could have pleased you."

"*Dame*!" said Saintonge, across the table. "What he had was thought good enough for me. Who the deuce is this fellow who must have a fatted calf all to himself?"

But Roop had turned again in his seat, and, with his back to the room, was busy filling his glass.

"Highness!" interrupted the tall man, breaking in without ceremony on the landlord's apologies. "Not yet, Michael, though it will come in good time. Here," and he turned to his fellow-traveller, "take my coat and fling it with yours on the table. Supper in that corner, Michael; and meanwhile I'll warm myself."

Whistling softly, he swaggered up the room and, turning his back to the fire, spread out his arms to catch the heat. Even when divested of his furs he was a man of quite remarkable bulk, and had Choiseul been present to catalogue his looks, as he had begun to catalogue those of Saintonge, he would have found a larger use for superlatives. He stood three inches taller, was broader in the shoulders, deeper in the chest, stronger limbed. His eyes were full, clear, and bold; his features so regular—but in such beauty as becomes a man—as almost to justify the paradox, "He is all fault who has no fault at all."

"Who the deuce is he?" said Saintonge a second time, the wine he had drunk moving him to a testy antagonism. "That he is a splendid animal there is no denying, but anyone who looks deeper than the padded skin can see he is a soulless brute."

"But, Monsieur," answered Roop, "we did not come to Russia to hunt souls."

"Did we not?" and Saintonge broke into a sudden laugh with little of merriment in it. Roop, it seemed to him, was humorously wrong; unless, indeed, it was to lose a soul and not to hunt one. "How do you know? Am I not travelling for pleasure? Roop, have women souls?"

"Never mind them, Monsieur; let us talk about to-morrow—and the Court."

"No souls there, you think? Roop, look at the fellow. He has been leering at her like—like—the animal he is. If he dares intrude upon her, a helpless woman——"

"As you mean to do to-morrow at the first opportunity? Yes, Monsieur?"

"I? Oh, but this is too much! Confound the brute's impertinence! Roop, did you see?"

"Sit down, Monsieur, sit down; it is not our business to play knight-errant for every wandering girl. We will have trouble enough on our hands without that folly."

"Oh ho! by my faith, she can take care of herself. What a stare she gave him! It was, Get to your kennel, dog! plain as words. There they go, mistress and maid, and leave him gnawing his nails. Up on your feet while they leave the room, Roop, you lout, and if you are not a French gentleman, at least let them think you have the courtesy of one."

But Roop did not move. So far from rising, he leaned across the table, his back turned yet more broadly to the group at the further end of the room, and busied himself by again filling his glass in what seemed an almost ostentatious indifference.

"Not I!" he said. "And if you knew your Russia as I do you would keep your seat too. You see," he went on, as the door closed behind the two women, neither having paid the least attention to Saintonge's deep reverence, "they are of the same opinion and you

have earned no thanks. Mind your own business is an excellent rule, Monsieur, and nowhere wiser than in Russia."

The traveller by the fire who had so roused Saintonge's wrath appeared in no way abashed by his repulse. His blue eyes hardened a little, the full lips grew less full, but the smile never left the handsome face, nor was there any display of vexation.

"Who is she, Michael?" he asked as the landlord returned. "A pretty face and the devil of a temper—two things I could never resist; and the one never looks the worse for the other."

"I don't know, Excellency, but she came by the Moscow road, and goes on to Petersburg to-morrow."

"Oh! A country girl? That accounts for her prudery. She will change her views at Court, and after supper we may teach her a first lesson. If she has much to learn, she cannot begin too soon—eh, Peter Paul?" and he turned with a laugh to his companion.

But the answer was a gesture of dissent.

"Better not with so much at stake. It might be resented——" and he lowered his voice so that the end of the sentence was lost to Saintonge.

"Resented? Psha! Petersburg is a day's journey off."

"Still, it is dangerous."

"Let it be dangerous. That is where we differ, you and I, and in a few other things. I like my wine full-flavoured, while you—but here is supper. Let it warm that cold stomach of yours, and after the second bottle you will see as I do."

CHAPTER VIII

THE FIRST GENTLEMAN OF THE COURT

IN a few words Gregory Orloff had sketched himself with a broad accuracy which no laboured biography could have surpassed. He liked his wine full-flavoured, and the fuller the flavour the deeper he drank; nor did he much care from what vintage he satisfied his thirst or at whose expense. To drop the metaphor, no intrigue, whether of love or politics, could be too audacious to daunt him, no mad prank so insane as to bid him pause for thought, nor could danger turn him back. The audacity, the madness, the danger were but the flavour of the wine, and so many lures to draw him to a fuller-hearted extravagance.

His career had proved this true. At Zorndorff, four years earlier, the wound which had invalided him to St. Petersburg was earned by a careless temerity too wildly rash to be ranked as courage. And yet from the tree folly he had plucked that fruit success which many better men missed; and the disaster which drove him from the field opened up a career at Court as splendid as it was unscrupulous. In the capital the same daring heedlessness marked him out, and upon the fall of the favourite, Poniatowski, he stepped at a stride into the place the Pole left vacant in the good graces of the Grand Duchess. Nor were the two ill-matched, for in this one thing, at least, Catherine resembled him—she, too, unless rumour lied, liked her wine of life full-

flavoured, and cared little for the vintage so long as the draught tickled her palate.

As the door closed behind the two women Saintonge flung himself back on the settle and turned to Roop.

"When God made what is called a Russian gentleman there was clay enough left over for—a French valet! Well, Roop, what next?"

"This, Monsieur," answered Roop, without the faintest sign of offence at either the sneering words or the tone which sharpened the edge of the contempt. "To-morrow we shall leave for St. Petersburg at——"

"To-morrow," interrupted Saintonge, "we shall leave just fifteen minutes earlier than Mademoiselle, neither more nor less. Find out the hour, and, Roop, see that you play me no tricks."

"What is your purpose, Monsieur?"

"To travel for pleasure like a gentleman of Provence!"

"I warn you," said Roop gravely, "you are risking success."

"Where?"

"At Court."

"At which Court? There are so many courts which seem to you like old pockets. And, my faith! to me also, for so far I have found both empty. At which Court, Roop?"

For a moment Roop paused, then he replied, his voice still full of anxious gravity:

"At two: both at Petersburg and Versailles."

"Roop, who are you and what are you?"

"A friend, Monsieur; and if I may very humbly say——"

"Curse your humility! What are you, I say again? Are you a spy? And whose?"

"Hush, Monsieur, there is no need to raise your voice. A friend, I repeat. Monsieur de Saintonge, if you would only trust me, only be guided by me, I am sure I could help you."

"Curse your guidance, and keep your help till it's asked for. I can choose for myself. As I said beyond the frontier, I am master!"

"No!" answered Roop. "France is master; and though I told you in Paris that I can patch, I can't patch botched jobs, and until you recross the frontier you have a master—just as I have. Must I be plainer? You are even less free than I am. I am only Anton Roop, the valet who earns his pay; you are bound by the honour of a Saintonge de Laval—and your necessities," he added as an afterthought.

Saintonge made no answer, but his face ceased to merit Choiseul's description, and had he not been uncertain whether, after all, Roop was anything more than a valet in the secret service of the Bureau des Etrangers he would have struck the other as he leaned across the table. But, indifferent to the passion he had raised, Roop pushed his point ruthlessly home.

"But perhaps you misunderstand me? When I say necessities I mean no offence. The necessities are those of your name and class. I, who serve for wages, am faithful to my pay, but a Saintonge de Laval would be faithful to his word even against himself. That is the misfortune of being born a gentleman. Was there no pledge, Monsieur de Saintonge? Is the power of France as a nation not in question—perhaps, even the honour of France? And are these to be risked, are these to be worse than risked, are they to be wrecked, just because a fool of a girl turns her shoulder on the handsomest man in Russia, and the first gentleman of the Court? That was in public, and, being country-bred, she is raw to the game. You looked on, and I looked on; I, and my fellow-louts by the fire; so she played the prude and coquette. Wait! I say no more, but wait! That was in public. You do not know Russia as I do."

"She is a good woman——" began Saintonge.

But Roop interrupted him with a jeer.

"Tut! tut! A good woman! *Mon Dieu!* what do you know about good women? It must be the young gentleman of Provence who is talking, not Monsieur de Choiseul's shadow in St. Petersburg, fresh from his year of Versailles! And how very young the young gentleman must be! Not yet out of his milk-teeth, perhaps. But hush, Monsieur, say no more; they are coming this way."

Roop's sudden reference was to Orloff and his companion. According to the custom of the times, two bottles of wine had followed the three originally ordered, and of these Orloff had consumed the major part. But he was not therefore drunk. As a school for liberal drinking, whether its head was Empress or Emperor, Elizabeth or Peter, Petersburg was more than a match for Versailles, and with the best or worst Gregory Orloff could more than hold his own. His full, clear eyes shone a little brighter, his tongue was a little looser, his gay humour a little more boisterous, his smooth cheeks were faintly flushed—but that was all. His feet were steady, and he had full command of all his movements. As to Peter Paul, he was more sober than was quite becoming to the after-supper reputation of a gentleman of quality.

"Wait till to-morrow," he was urging, with as much authority as he dared instil into the persuasion.

But Orloff only turned upon him with a laugh.

"Nothing is worth having unless you get it at the time you want it!" he answered. "It is to-night that is dull, not to-morrow. And remember that to-morrow we must leave early." As he spoke he threw open the door which led to the upper part of the house. "But do you stay here. She may be really shy, and you will be less in the way."

"Where you go I go!" was the reply. "These were my orders," and the two went out, leaving the door open.

"Surely you must see," resumed Roop, drawing a sigh of relief and looking across his shoulder for the first time

since Orloff and the other had entered the room, "that no woman, not if she were an angel itself, can be a pin's weight in the balance with so much at stake? A woman? Psha! Wait forty-eight hours, Monsieur de Saintonge——"

But Saintonge was giving him no heed. Raising his hand sharply, he beckoned for silence.

"Hush! What noise is that?"

Through the open door came the sound of knocking, muffled somewhat by distance, and above the knocking Orloff's voice. The words were indistinguishable, nor would Saintonge have understood them even had they been clear; but as the knocking continued and the tones rose and fell, now persuasive, now almost threatening, there could be no doubt as to their meaning, and he sprang to his feet.

"Damnation!" he cried, pushing the table from him that he might have a free passage. "It is that lumping brute."

"Monsieur, Monsieur!" and leaning forward Roop caught him by the arm. "Let him alone. It is no business of ours to meddle——"

"Do you call this meddling? Listen to him! Listen! listen! Roop, what a cur you are!"

Whether by intention or accident Michael, the landlord, half blocked the door, but Saintonge swung him out of his way so that he spun half-way across the room, staggering. A lamp, hung in a cresset from the ceiling, lit the passage; at the further end narrow stairs rose to the upper floor. Here a short passage ran across the house, with two corridors, one to right and left, dividing the story into three blocks, the centre being lit and aired by dove-cot windows. Down one of the corridors Saintonge ran, guided by voices from the further end. The two men were standing together in the middle of the passage, Orloff insisting, the other expostulating with him.

"Did you ever know me turn back, either for man or woman? To have kissed her hand and said, 'May we meet again, Mademoiselle!' would have satisfied me at first; now—and it's the silly jade's own fault—nothing less than her mouth will do. The Empress? I am not afraid of the Empress. She has as much need of me as I have of her, and would forgive much more than this for the sake of my four brothers and their regiments of guards. The Empress and I understand each other. Stand aside, and I'll try the door again. You won't? By God! I'll make you."

But Saintonge, understanding nothing of what was said, had slipped between, and as Orloff pushed his companion back the two faced each other. For an instant there was a pause—upon the one side alert waiting, upon the other astonishment and blind rage. To be thwarted, or even challenged, was a new experience, and Orloff's wrath at the impertinence flamed to a white heat.

But the pause was only for an instant. Leaping forward, the Russian caught Saintonge round the body, his muscles stiffening in instinctive co-ordination as, with all his strength, he strove to fling the Frenchman aside. But though Saintonge swayed and rocked in the struggle he held his ground, and, panting as much with passion as with the violence of the effort, Orloff broke apart.

"There's a surer way than that," he cried thickly, and wrenched his sword out.

Utterly unprepared, Saintonge was defenceless against this new attack, and for a moment it looked like murder. But, even as his arm was drawn back to strike, Orloff controlled his blind rage.

"On guard!" he said, raising his point.

"Speak French, if you please," replied Saintonge, and the blades clashed.

"A Frenchman!" cried Orloff, stamping, as a fresh

gust of anger shook him, " a meddling Frenchman ! Do you hear, Peter Paul ? I might have known it was some such interfering fool ! Curse all foreigners—Germans, Holsteiners, Frenchmen—ah ha ! Have I got you ? Have I got you ? "

But he had not. The door against which Saintonge leaned back to avoid the thrust had opened suddenly, and in the surprise he had shifted his point. Fortunately for himself, the shift was upwards to an involuntary parry, and the lunge no more than ripped the cloth of his sleeve at the shoulder.

" Mademoiselle ! " he cried, hearing the rustle of a dress at his elbow, but not daring to move his gaze from Orloff's eyes, " for both our sakes have a care."

" I am afraid for neither," she answered in French, her voice shaking a little. Then, across his shoulder as he blocked the doorway, she spoke to Orloff : " You desired something, Monsieur ? "

" Leave to kiss——" he paused, and as he paused the flush grew ominously deep on Saintonge's cheek, " your hand," he added. " You opened the door, or I would have asked something more."

" It is too much as it is," broke in Saintonge. " Mademoiselle, it would be dishonour——"

" Not to me," she interrupted tartly, and now no tremor shook the words, " nor do I allow the word to be coupled with myself." Then her voice softened. " Monsieur, believe me I can trust my own honour as I would trust yours. Now, Monsieur."

Taking her hand in his as Saintonge perforce stood aside, biting his lip with an anger he did not attempt to conceal, Orloff again paused an instant.

" And your name, Mademoiselle ? "

" I do not see that my name matters, but I do not care who knows it : it is Ulrica Khitrovin."

" Ulrica Khitrovin ! " repeated Peter Paul in the background, a sudden consternation in his voice. " The

Empress' new Maid of Honour ? Orloff, Orloff, this is the deuce of a mess."

But if Orloff was also plainly taken by surprise, it was only for an instant.

"Till better things come!" he said half defiantly, and stooping, kissed her hand.

"That will be never," she flashed back, and looked him full in the face. Passing Saintonge, she touched him lightly on the arm. The colour which had flooded her cheeks had ebbed, leaving them very pale. "God be thanked for a brave and honourable gentleman! Some other time, Monsieur, I hope to say what I cannot speak to-night." Then the door closed, and the bolt was shot again into its place.

"Now I am at your service," said Saintonge. "You owe me an explanation and something more; but elsewhere, of course, that we may not be interrupted a second time."

But, with his companion's hand upon his arm, Orloff had already turned away.

"Sometimes I pay what I owe, sometimes I do not, but never till it pleases me. For once you are right, Paul. Let us visit that corner bin a second time."

Later, when Saintonge reckoned up the result of his intervention, all he could find was a rip to his coat and a pricked pride: of the deeper wound he was still unconscious.

CHAPTER IX

SAINTONGE IS HIS OWN PROVIDENCE

BUT next morning added another and unexpected item to the short list of the overnight's product. Having dressed by the light of his guttering candle, and having carefully added both his antagonist of the night before, and the ingratitude of woman, to his usual morning commination—Curse Choiseul, curse Russia, curse Roop, curse the Empress, the miserable darkness, the biting cold, the world in general, and himself for a particular fool: a malediction as comprehensive as it was conscientious—he flung open the door. As it swung back he staggered, caught suddenly by the knees; his hand was grasped by two hands bigger, stronger, harder than his own, and was carried to a hairy mouth to be mumbled and kissed.

"Who on earth are you? Get up, man, get up from your knees and let me look at you. Confound you, leave my hand alone!"

But Dmitry had not the least intention of getting up, and naturally understood not a word of what was said.

"My Lord!" he stammered in the intervals of his devotion to Saintonge's unwilling hand, which he pressed now to his lips, now to his breast, and now crushed between both his own till the bones ached. "Why was I not there to kill him like a rat! But I was away and knew nothing, and so my life is yours—yours and hers."

"Get up," said Saintonge, "or I'll kick you up!"

"My Lord, ask it when you will, how you will. It is all Dmitry has, and it is yours—yours and hers. You believe me, my Lord, you believe me?" and, looking up in Saintonge's eyes, he patted the hand he held that he might emphasise the words. "She is my mistress, but it isn't just that. It is that I love her, my Lord, love her as a dog loves; for what am I but a dog? But when Dmitry gives his love he gives everything. You understand, my Lord—everything, everything!"

"Get up, you fool, and don't kneel there, mumbling gibberish! You are her man, are you not? Where is Roop, I wonder? But no! I don't know that I want Roop. I think I can understand you without Roop. Here, get up, I tell you," and, plucking his hand away, Saintonge caught Dmitry underneath the arms, half lifting him to his feet.

After all, comprehension was not so very difficult. A dog, as he had called himself, can always make itself understood, and Dmitry's intelligence was even more highly developed, thus compensating for the absence of the expressive ears and tail. But how to let Dmitry know that he comprehended? How, but as one lets a dog know that its dumb demonstration of affection has touched the heart?

"You are a good fellow," said Saintonge, patting his thick shoulder much as if it was a shaggy coat; "and, after all, it is perhaps just as well you and I should know a thing or two which Roop does not know. If he has cards up his sleeve, why should not I have a Knave or two to trump his Queen?"

"My Lord," replied Dmitry earnestly, "it is yours when you ask it—to-day, to-morrow, any day: never doubt that, never, never. What Dmitry says he means. As for that other, may all the thousand devils——" But the very violence of his rage choked him, and when Saintonge turned the corner of the passage on his way downstairs the peasant's huge hands were still beating

the air in uncouth gesticulation. It was just as well for Gregory Orloff that he had quitted the inn before daybreak.

In the guest-room the landlord and Roop were in close conversation, but as Saintonge entered they drew apart. From their looks it was evident he was in disgrace with them both, and the landlord's greeting was of the curtest. With a yet curter nod Saintonge glanced round the room. As he had anticipated, there was no sign of his overnight's antagonist, but a place was set at the end of the long table, and covers for two laid in the corner where Ulrica Khitrovin had supped with her maid.

"When do they leave, Roop? Have you found out as I told you? In an hour? Then have you ordered our horses?"

"Michael says there is a difficulty."

"A difficulty! Eh? This is the first time for a month I have heard you talk of difficulties. I don't like it, Roop, it smells of—well, I won't say what, not just yet. What is the difficulty?"

"His Excellency, Count Orloff, required——"

"Count Orloff? Who is Count Orloff?"

"Monsieur is indeed a stranger!" The landlord's sneer as he spoke was as near offence as he dared.

"Roop, who is this Orloff?"

"Her Majesty's—Treasurer; and, as a result of his short acquaintance with you, Monsieur, I see I must redeem my promise to patch old rags," and Roop pointed to the frayed cut ripped on Saintonge's shoulder by Orloff's sword.

"Oh, that fellow? Then we shall meet again. That was the one thing which troubled me. Now, friend Michael, let there be horses ready in just half an hour, or Monsieur de Breteuil—you know Monsieur de Breteuil? I thought so! Well, Monsieur de Breteuil will ask the reason why I arrive late, and to explain I shall have to tell the story of last night. And yet it seemed

to me that Her Majesty's Treasurer—you said Treasurer, Roop, did you not ?—would prefer that I held my tongue."

For an instant the landlord hesitated, and, scratching his ear, looked aslant at Roop for instructions. So far the scandal was in small compass, nor would it serve anyone's ends to make it public. The girl might be trusted to hold her tongue, and certainly he would earn no thanks from Orloff for raking over last night's burnt-out fires. But the valet failed him in his need ; and with a " I will do my best," Michael turned away.

" Do what I tell you, whether it be your best or your worst ! But breakfast first, friend Michael, breakfast first," and, whistling gaily, Saintonge seated himself, well pleased at his little victory. It seemed that when he matched wits with Roop he did not always come off second best.

As he ate, Mademoiselle Khitrovin entered, accompanied by her maid, and Saintonge, rising to his feet, bowed formally without recognition. Her return bow as she passed to her place was as grave and formal as his own, but there was a light in her eyes as their glances met which hinted to Saintonge that in one respect his morning commination had been unjustified. Her gratitude, perhaps, only failed in expression.

Yes ! he told himself, as presently he drew the fur robe up under his chin to ward off the intense cold, he had done himself justice in these last twenty-four hours —justice both as a man of heart and of head, as diplomatist, courtier, and gentleman of Provence. Richelieu would have found no blue mould to flick from his shoulder, Lauzun no loophole for a biting jest. Even Laval would have admitted he could have done no better himself. Yes ! things had gone well, as they usually do with the man who takes Fate by the shoulder and hustles her along the path he would have her follow, not looking too particularly where the feet tread. He

had found Roop out, if not fully, at least sufficiently. Roop knew why he was in Russia, knew also what were the stakes in the game : otherwise he would never have referred to Laval's wealth. That could be no chance shot. To treat him as a spy, without so appearing to treat him, seemed to Saintonge the best way to deal with Roop.

Nor was that all. Even the boor, Orloff, had played into his hand. Through him he had won the girl's—what should he call it ? Her confidence ? That, and something more than that, if her eyes that morning had not lied. Glorious eyes they were, too. Grey eyes which sparkle are the finest eyes in the world. Her gratitude ? Saintonge blew out his lips—he did not like the word, although it was against want of gratitude he had railed so bitterly as he had dressed in the half darkness. But at that time he had not looked into her eyes. Now he had looked, and the word was too formal, too cold, too—too—distant, unless, indeed—and he laughed a little—it took to itself some such outward expression as the vicarious gratitude of the uncouth peasant. Certainly in it there was neither formality nor lack of warmth ! These northerns were evidently children of nature. Well, if his plan fell out correctly, she would have her opportunity at their first halting-place. Dmitry had been as good as dumb, but with his mistress it would be his part to assist Nature to articulate expression. The civilisation of Versailles had taught him how that might be done.

The sleigh was one to which three horses were harnessed abreast, and contained places for four travellers. Saintonge sat with the driver, behind them Roop ; their baggage followed on a trailed sleigh attached by a short rope.

" Monsieur," said Roop, leaning forward, " why not have followed ? Then we could have made up on them at our ease."

"Because you would have told Michael to give us the slower horses, and I do not care to look like a fool. As it is, they will reach us where we halt for dinner."

"Sooner, I think," said Roop, and laughed with less respect than quite befitted a valet. "Listen!"

There was no wind to carry sound, but now that his senses were on the alert Saintonge caught the faint tinkle of bells through the clear air. Rising in the sleigh, he steadied himself with a hand on the driver's shoulder and looked back. Behind, travelling three yards to their two, was a sleigh like their own, nor was the distance so great but he could recognise Mademoiselle Khitrovin seated by the side of Dmitry.

"There must be no entanglements," said Roop, his eyes on Saintonge's face, and this time he did not laugh. Though he had never heard of the wisdom of Solomon, he knew that if there is a time to jest there is also a time to be sober, and Saintonge's face was a grim warning. "Entanglements may ruin more than you, and some day you will thank me."

Saintonge's answer was to drop back into his seat, reaching forward and catching the reins with one hand as he did so; then, leaning in front of the astonished driver, he dragged the whip from him with the other hand and laid it furiously across the backs of the startled horses. Twice, thrice, the lash fell, and the driving was as the driving of Jehu. But in snatching the reins Saintonge had caught them up unevenly, straining the horses unintentionally aside. Seeing the danger, he threw his weight on the opposite rein, and the sleigh, swinging violently, dug into the drift on the further bank, hung checked a second, then burst through the snow with a jerk and overturned, flinging all three out into the roadway. For an instant the horses strained, kicking, and with another jerk, yet more violent, the rope-traces broke.

Neither Roop nor the driver was hurt, but Saintonge

fell more heavily, and when, five minutes later, Mademoiselle Khitrovin drove into the wreck he still lay where he had fallen, half propped against the bank. Promptly she took command.

"Marya, thou hast the flask; quickly! Some on this handkerchief that I may bathe his temples: now a drop or two in the cup—there, that is enough; do you want to choke him? His throat is not of brass, like Dmitry's. Chafe his hands—harder, harder. See! his eyes are opening. You are better, Monsieur?"

Languidly, Saintonge opened his eyes, looked up into her face a moment, as languidly closed them again and rolled his head more fully into the bend of her supporting arm; then he drew a long sigh, shivering a little as if cold.

"The cup again, Marya: a little more this time. Try and drink, Monsieur: you must, indeed you must! You do not know how quickly our Russian cold penetrates. Dmitry, how long before Monsieur's sleigh will be fit to travel?"

"Half an hour at least, Excellency. The ring-bolts are——"

"Half an hour? Why, he might die! Lead your horses up beside me and we will take him on with us: he and I behind; you, Marya, in front with Dmitry."

But the new arrangement was very far from pleasing Roop. Abandoning his pretended work of repairing the broken sleigh, he crossed the road and, kneeling down beside Saintonge, lifted an eyelid with his thumb.

"He is less hurt than you suppose, Mademoiselle," he said, and spoke even a greater truth than he knew. "See, his colour is good. Leave him to me, and in less than ten minutes we shall be on the road."

"You are his servant?"

"Yes, Mademoiselle."

"Then attend to his sleigh; it is badly twisted, and

two will mend it quicker than one. Meanwhile, your master must not lie here in the snow."

"But, Mademoiselle, he would not wish to trouble you; of that I am quite sure."

"You know what occurred last night? It must have been common gossip, and I see from your face you know. And yet, knowing that, you talk of trouble? Are you ready, Dmitry?"

"No, Mademoiselle, no: I cannot allow it. My master is in my charge, and I must forbid——"

"You cannot allow? You forbid? Who are you to allow or forbid? You are impertinent. Dmitry," and the full, strong voice slipped from French into Russian, "if this person dares to interfere——"

But Dmitry waited for no specific instructions. By a touch of his foot and a push from his broad shoulder he sent Roop sprawling on his knees in the snow.

"I'm ready, Excellency. Marya, hold thou the horses a moment."

"Then lift him gently: now hold him as he is and wait till I make ready." Mounting the sleigh, she spread out the heavy bearskin robe and folded it round Saintonge as Dmitry placed him on the hindermost seat. "There, that is right. Now mount, you two, and drive gently." Then she turned to Roop, who stood aside dusting himself with both hands, his face as white as the powdered snow he flicked from his clothing. "You will find us at Povolsk. Go on, Dmitry."

"Yes," said Saintonge, lifting his head from where it lay against her shoulder. "Yes, Roop, my good fellow, you will find us at Povolsk!" and, cracking his whip, Dmitry drove on.

CHAPTER X

THE OPPORTUNITY OF A GENTLEMAN OF PLEASURE

IT was remarkable with what rapidity Saintonge recovered the full use of his senses under the reviving influence of the keen, clear air. Moaning slightly, a sigh of weakness rather than a groan of pain, he drew a deep breath, and laying an arm across Mademoiselle Khitrovin's shoulders, raised himself more upright, and at the same time moved closer to her.

"Ah, Mademoiselle," he whispered, with a lingering touch of feebleness, "no wonder I dreamt that I had died and was in heaven with the angels."

"And wake to find yourself in Russia? What a misfortune!"

"But with you, and so the dream was at least half true."

"I feared your arm was broken," she said, "you lay so still and so—so—faint," and there was such a depth of pity in her voice, such a gentle, soothing commiseration, that he pardoned her for ignoring his advances.

"No; oh, no."

"Are you quite sure? I think you should make certain."

"Quite; see!" and Saintonge lifted up his arm, moving it from side to side.

"But is the shoulder not hurt?" she persisted, and again her grave solicitude was very pleasant. "Can

you really move your arm over your head and forwards ? Yes, that is good. And down ? You are sure you can move it down ? Again good ; and now, Monsieur de Saintonge, that it is in your lap, let it rest there—unless you prefer to share the front seat with Dmitry."

" Saintonge ? " he echoed, covering with an air of astonishment his chagrin at being out-manœuvred. Nor was the surprise wholly assumed. " You know my name ? "

" I have a maid—and do you think I could forget last night ? " The coldness with which she had spoken her significant admonition passed from her voice as she spoke, her eyes grew tender and her breath quickened a little as it does when the heart throbs suddenly. " Monsieur de Saintonge, it is hard for a woman to say all that is in her heart ; and last night, before these—these others, I could not venture to speak at all."

" Oh, Mademoiselle Khitrovin, you make too much of it, it was nothing, nothing."

" It was the act of a brave man and an honourable gentleman, Monsieur de Saintonge. No depreciation of yours can detract from it. When I opened the door——"

" Oh, Mademoiselle," cried Saintonge, " why did you do that ? It spoiled everything."

" I did it because I felt afraid for the first time, but not for myself. Say nothing, Monsieur de Saintonge ; if I was afraid for you it was not—how can I explain myself ? Could I have your death on my conscience ? Or even less, could I endure that you should be wounded for my sake ? And all for an empty punctilio ! I know what you would say, but I can be as nice for my own honour as you can be. Where I think you men mistake is this—the form matters nothing, at times even the act matters nothing ; it is the spirit, the meaning, the intent behind it all which befouls, and I—I washed my hand afterwards as if from the soiling of the

road, and was none the worse. Could I let you die, or risk death, for that, Monsieur de Saintonge ? "

" But you take it much too seriously," he said lightly, partly because he thought to set her at her ease, but partly, to do him justice, because he did not care to seem too much moved. " Monsieur Orloff is so big I was sure to have touched him first."

" Then, perhaps, after all, it was for myself I was afraid. Perhaps it was that a woman resents being brawled over like a stake at cards."

" I have in my time known some women," said Saintonge, " who had no such resentments."

" Then, Monsieur," and as she spoke the strong, slim figure stiffened involuntarily, and the mouth curved in contempt, " you have known women at whose door Monsieur Orloff would not have knocked twice, and I do not envy you your acquaintance."

It was on Saintonge's tongue to reply : " Whereas you, Mademoiselle, will not open till love knocks, and when you do I think the door will be flung wide ? " But he reflected in time that Marya, who also understood French, was within earshot, and that his opportunity would surely come at Povolsk, and so made an indifferent answer. There is no sense in shaking a tree when an hour of pleasant waiting will see the fruit dropping into the hand fully ripe.

It was not to be expected that the inn at Povolsk would be on the same exalted scale as that of Dolgoburg ; a mere house of call, travellers halted there to dine and then passed on. But if its pretensions were less its comforts were greater ; its decorations gay with a barbaric over-elaboration of display, due, largely, to its proximity to Gatschina. Povolsk was a favourite summer excursion from that already fashionable centre, and the Russian's native love for warmth of colour was amply catered for. To Saintonge the chief advantage above Dolgoburg was that the wide, open fire had dis-

appeared from the guest-room, and with it the almost constant presence of servants. At Versailles they would have been ignored as part of the ordinary furnishings, but he had an uneasy consciousness that this Russian girl with the frank, clear eyes was not as other women.

The meal served, too, had a gross and copious plenteousness national in its profusion, nor did he resent Roop's arrival with the repaired sleigh while he was yet dining. It rather added a relish to the strange meats to be found alone and in friendly companionship with Mademoiselle Khitrovin. If Roop had not come to Russia to patch botched jobs he might as well have stayed behind in France.

"And you are not hurt, Roop? No? Nor the worthy driver? No again? That is good. I should never have forgiven myself if you had been injured, either of you! Would you believe it, Mademoiselle, but that rascal of an innkeeper gave us bad horses—absolute logs! Next time, Roop, see to them yourself. And yet they seem to have travelled faster since the accident? My weight the less, I suppose."

Roop stood the banter of word and voice, and the smiling jeer in Saintonge's eyes, with a grim set of the mouth. If he had spoken his mind it would have been to say: "There is no fool like a self-complacent fool, unless it is the fool who sacrifices an enduring end to some trivial gain of the moment; and you are both!" But he only waited in deferential silence till Saintonge paused.

"No doubt, Monsieur. And that you should have recovered so rapidly is a fortunate miracle, only equalled by the other miracle that even when you were unconscious from the severity of the fall your cheeks never lost their colour."

"And miracles I have always been told come through the angels,' answered Saintonge carelessly, but with a glance at Mademoiselle Khitrovin. "Now go and dine,

Roop. Take your time; the rest will do you good after your shaking. You will find Dmitry and Marya in the kitchen."

"Monsieur, we should start at once."

"In an hour will do."

"At once," repeated Roop, with an emphasis that lent weight to the insistence. "As it is we shall arrive late in St. Petersburg, and if Monsieur de Breteuil——"

"Do as you are bid," said Saintonge curtly. "Don't you think, Mademoiselle, that when one travels for pleasure it is a mistake to be fettered by times and seasons?"

"And you travel for pleasure only?" she asked, as Roop left the room, his face showing his angry discontent as plainly as he dared.

They were seated with just the angle of the table between them, he at the end, she beside him on the left. The servants who had attended them through the meal had followed Roop from the room, so that they were alone, and it seemed to Saintonge that at last his opportunity had come. But the absence of coquetry, and her utter unconsciousness, confounded him a little; they were traits to which he was unaccustomed. In imagination he saw the light of challenge, of more than challenge, of invitation, even, which would have risen in d'Esparbès' eyes. Here there was nothing but tranquillity and friendly interest. He must change that, and to see the light grow would be pleasant.

"For pleasure only," he answered, leaning across the table towards her; "and when least looked for I have found it."

"Like Jehu, in driving furiously?"

"In what followed and what went before. To be near you, to see the shifting light in those sweet eyes—child, has no one ever told you how pretty you are? Surely! But if not, if men are so blind in Russia, let me be the first."

"You forget yourself, and that we are strangers," she answered, drawing back but not leaving her seat. "Or must I say to you what I said to your servant? I think you heard me?"

"Strangers?" he replied lightly. "No, no. Friendship is reckoned by heartbeats, not by hours. Surely last night and to-day count for much."

"Last night——" She paused, turning her eyes full upon him, and when she spoke again she not only spoke very slowly, as if she sifted out her words with care, but Saintonge was conscious of a double change in her voice. The touch of bitterness with which she began was gone, and in its place there was reproach, but the reproach of regret rather than of upbraiding. "Which are you, Monsieur de Saintonge, an unselfish, generous-hearted gentleman, or only another Orloff? Last night I was in doubt, and to-day I am in doubt again. And yet I am not an ignorant girl, but a woman who has learned sorrow and the follies of men in a hard school. It was like Count Orloff to speak of me as you spoke to your servant in the supper-room."

"Mademoiselle," said Saintonge, with an earnestness undaunted by the knowledge that his excuse was lame, "how could I suppose you would understand?"

"Does that mend it? Would Count Orloff care if I understood? That you thought it was enough. Did I not tell you a moment ago that it is the thought which counts rather than the act? Then, later, as we left the room, you had changed, and were the courteous French gentleman. But that might mean nothing. Politeness is not the prerogative of saints only. But later still——" Again she paused and again their eyes met.

While she spoke Saintonge had been thinking rapidly. He was not given to introspection: few men or women—healthy-minded men and women—are so given. They act by instinct, not in obedience to any clever deduction,

and, as instinct is often only another name for habit of thought, the act is really a revelation of the inner self. But a single word has power on the instant to conjure up an entire picture to the mind, a picture in which the details are as pitilessly clear as if a Wiertz had laid on the colours in inexorable fidelity. So was it now with Saintonge in her brief recapitulation of the events of the past night, and what he saw disturbed him. To be likened to Orloff, whom he despised, and to find the resemblance reasonably true, was a shock and a surprise, which sobered him out of his Versailles mood. Human nature has often to be shaken out of its centre of self-complacency, before it can realise itself to be what others see it.

"But later still?" he repeated, groping after consolation as she paused.

"Later still I had no doubt. How could I?" Her grey eyes kindled, and a flush mounted to her cheeks. Even her voice gained in depth and power of meaning. "Later on I knew you for a chivalrous, single-hearted gentleman, who gave no thought to himself. Unasked, unprompted, you stood between a helpless woman and insult, and risked your life without a moment's grudge for a woman's honour. It hurt you that she should be shamed even in appearance. No: I had no doubt, none at all—until to-day."

"And I," said Saintonge, no longer pretending to answer lightly, "if I thought of it at all, had no doubt either until to-day. But I think the truth lies, as usual, between the two extremes. Please God, I am not an Orloff. After to-day that sounds, even to myself, like an unctuous hypocrisy. But for once—in our world it is unusual—for once we are saying what we really think, and I think that is true."

"Monsieur de Saintonge, I am sure it is true."

"Thank you, Mademoiselle. But neither am I—the other. Nor must you think I am because of last night.

Mere brute courage, spurred by a burst of anger, is a small thing to be proud of in a man, and not so long ago I was more afraid of being laughed at by a boy than of Orloff's sword in my lungs, or both their swords. I fear, Mademoiselle, that I am, after all, only a gentleman travelling for pleasure."

"A little more than that, I think," she answered, smiling, yet with a suspicious touch of moisture around the eyes which looked frankly into his; "but since you are that at least, we shall probably meet again."

"At Court?"

"Yes."

As she spoke there was a jangle of sleigh-bells, and Marya entered the room. Saintonge had had his opportunity, and it was time for Mademoiselle Khitrovin to begin the last stage of her journey.

"Yes," he repeated, rising; "but remember that at Court a man of pleasure is more a man of pleasure than ever."

Mademoiselle Khitrovin held out her hand in farewell.

"If that be true, and I do not see the necessity," she replied, "then I am sure the fault will be the fault of the Court."

So long as the sleigh remained in sight Saintonge, bareheaded in the wintry sunshine, stood watching it grow smaller and smaller until, a black dot against the whiteness of the snow, it swept round a curve and disappeared. Then, with a shrug of the shoulders and a half-rueful shake of the head, he turned in at the inn door. If he fared no better with the Empress than he fared with the maid of honour, the King was as good as heir to Laval already. And yet what more could he have urged in the face of such a pure and gentle womanliness?

"*Dame*!" he said vexedly, "they don't breed that kind in Versailles! Roop! Roop! Where the devil are you? And why have I to wait like this for the horses?"

CHAPTER XI

THE EARS OF FRANCE IN RUSSIA

"WE heard of you a fortnight ago," said Breteuil, and it seemed to Saintonge that towards a countryman who had just completed so long a journey through the very heart of an unaccustomed winter, there was something lacking in his cordiality. It was the day after his arrival in St. Petersburg, and they were alone in the private room of the Ambassador's hotel. There had been no cordial greetings, no inquiries as to the comforts or discomforts of his weeks of travel, none of the little courtesies natural to men of a common fatherland and an equal class so far from home. "Monsieur de Choiseul wrote to me at some length as to your usefulness in furthering his policy, and I may say at once that—um—yes—now that I look at you, the scheme, mad as it seemed at first sight, may possibly succeed."

The pause had been longer than the break in the word indicates, and Saintonge was fully conscious of its significance. There had been time for the appraisement which at first had puzzled him, and had now grown hateful; nor did it require any effort of imagination to hear once more Choiseul's voice saying: "Six feet or more, broad-shouldered, muscular as Hercules, more than good-looking."

"No one agrees that it is a mad scheme more heartily than I do," he answered, and as Breteuil had already

resumed his seat Saintonge drew a chair from the wall and sat down in turn. If his reception was that of a lackey seeking employment, he did not choose to accept tamely the implied menial despisal. "Nor is it a scheme of my devising or seeking. You had better understand that at the outset. But," and his voice drifted into just such a tone as Breteuil had used, a tone more offensive than offence itself, "I think I may say at once that—um—yes—if the scheme is to succeed it can only succeed by our acting in harmony, and the successful result is not for my benefit, but for France. At least, that is the opinion of Monsieur de Choiseul and the King."

"The King? Is not that going a little too far?"

"I think not."

"Then you saw the King before leaving Versailles?"

"Yes."

"With reference to this mad idea of Monsieur de Choiseul's?"

"Certainly: in Monsieur de Choiseul's private cabinet, just we three alone together," answered Saintonge carelessly, and, under the circumstances, it is scarcely to be wondered that, while stating a truth, he left much to be inferred which that truth hardly warranted. It was his Roland to Breteuil's Oliver.

Breteuil sat silent. That Saintonge should have been sent at all was resented as a rebuff. Examined nakedly, it meant that Versailles had lost faith in his powers of diplomacy, and was groping after other means of gaining its desired end. The coming of Saintonge was therefore a virtual supersession, none the less real because it was secret. That was a thought which rankled, and in his weeks of waiting the canker had bitten deep. Through these weeks, too, he had laid the slight at Choiseul's door: the Minister for Foreign Affairs was snubbing his ambassador. Well, if he was superseded by Choiseul's nominee, let Choiseul's nominee carry out Choiseul's policy, fighting for his own hand as best he could, and

for the time Breteuil forgot that a public servant has no private feelings. A nation must build up its security and its progress with the tools best adapted to make solid the structure.

But in a few words Saintonge had changed all that. It was no longer Choiseul's hand which withdrew the knight to move forward the pawn. It was the act of the King himself! And the traditions of the Grand Monarque were still sufficiently powerful for Breteuil to say—

"The King can do no wrong."

"Then the King approves?" he said at last, and in the change of tone Saintonge was swift to note the shift of mental attitude.

"Most certainly. He also said that Madame Pompadour would be highly pleased."

"Oh, Madame Pompadour?" repeated Breteuil, still more thoughtfully as it became still clearer that he had been on the verge of an unpardonable blunder. "So she is in it too? And did she approve?"

"His Majesty said her great desire was that I should start at once." Which, Saintonge told himself, with a twinkle in his eyes which Breteuil took to be that of triumph, was just enough of a truth to be that lie diplomatic which cannot be disproved. Madame Pompadour certainly desired that he should quit Versailles, but not necessarily that he should go to Russia. But in diplomacy, as in other branches of fiction, it is the true artist who leaves something to the imagination.

"Madame Pompadour?" repeated Breteuil a second time, and paused in thought. "Then we must do the best we can," he went on more briskly than he had yet spoken, and with a greater show of cordiality. In politics, as in chess, the activity of the Queen sometimes counts for more than that of the King. "And first, you must fully understand the situation. The Emperor is German mad. To him the King of Prussia is more than

a man: he is a religion, and unless we can interpose a stronger influence——"

But Saintonge, still smarting from the acid of his reception, interrupted the ambassador without scruple.

"Your pardon, but there are times when ignorance is wisdom, and this is one of them. That you should know these things is necessary and a matter of course, you who are the ears and eyes of France. But I—what am I! Thistledown of Provence blown to St. Petersburg by some warm wind from the south! What should I know of political intrigue? And what I do not know I cannot stammer over to conceal. Let me play my part unburdened by weight of knowledge, even though I blunder into a speech better left unsaid. Better be simple than suspect, and the very gaucherie will prove my good faith. The world is not jealous of poverty or a fool."

"A fool? Come, Monsieur de Saintonge, you pay the King's discernment a poor compliment."

"I think not. The man who says, 'I am a fool,' is often less a fool than he who says, 'I am wise.' But let a man say this or that loudly enough, and nine times in ten he is believed."

"And you think the Empress will believe?''

"That I am a fool?"

"No, but that which you have come from Paris to tell her."

"What do you think?" answered Saintonge coolly, and looked Breteuil full in the face.

"Am I to speak frankly? Then—yes, almost anything is possible to a colossal impudence."

"Perhaps you speak out of experience?" said Saintonge, quite unruffled by the impertinence. Every day he found his feet more firmly under him, and nothing that Breteuil might say could bite as deeply as Lauzun's licensed gibes, or Richelieu's more polished but no less bitter jests.

But the shaft of Saintonge's sarcasm flew past Breteuil and hit another mark.

"You mean Orloff?"

"Eh—what is that?" and Saintonge sat up in his chair suddenly. "Orloff? What of Orloff?"

"A moment ago you said, 'Tell me nothing'; now it is, 'What of Orloff?' Be consistent, Monsieur de Saintonge, be consistent."

"I leave consistency to ambassadors, Monsieur de Breteuil, and I ask, 'What of Orloff?' because I have met a person of that name who was certainly impudent—impudent as the very devil himself!"

"Tell me what you know," said Breteuil.

For a moment Saintonge hesitated; then he reflected that evasion would be to little purpose. Better he should speak than Roop, or, if Roop must speak, as he believed he would in any case, let him tell his tale as stale news. So in as few words as possible he told the story of the last night spent at Dolgoburg, and, if Breteuil had but known, the silences of the narrative were more eloquent, more significant, than the history. He said nothing of his drinking bout with Roop, of which he was now rather ashamed; nothing of his attempt to force a confidence from an underling, though that he still considered justified; nothing of his accident on the road, or of what happened subsequently at the inn at Povolsk. Already, hardly consciously, Saintonge was admitting to himself a delicacy for a woman's name which he had not learned in his schooling at Versailles. Mademoiselle Khitrovin, therefore, figured only as a passing stranger, casually met and already almost forgotten; while Orloff's intrusion upon her was thrown into as strong a light as possible. Instinctively, too, he concealed the means she had taken to put an end to the quarrel.

The memory of it still galled him bitterly, and he hardly dared trust his voice in the telling, lest too

deep a resentment would peep out. But Breteuil saw the flaw in the story, and at once put his finger upon it.

"That was not like Orloff. If he has the devil's impudence, he has the obstinacy of the devil, too."

Saintonge also saw the flaw, and an explanation being necessary he seized upon the first which suggested itself.

"The fellow who was with him——"

"Yes, Roop."

"Roop?" and again Saintonge started in his chair. In the telling of his tale he was learning more than he told. So that was Roop.

"Yes, but one thing at a time. Leave Roop alone for the present; or, rather, what did Roop do?"

"He urged some strong plea or other. Of course, he spoke in Russian and I could not understand what he said, but I think I caught the Empress' name."

"Of course, of course; now I see," and Breteuil smote his hands together. "Who was the girl? Surely, with such a scheme as yours in your head, you found out her name? Of course, you see the possibilities, the advantage this may be to us? Gad! through her you may climb over Orloff's back, after all."

"I think, Monsieur de Breteuil, we had better keep her entirely out of this—this—discussion."

"Why, in heaven's name?"

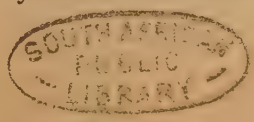
"Because she is a woman, because she would naturally shrink——"

"Bah! Quixote is dead."

"Then, because she trusted me as a gentleman, and, having trusted me, I——"

But again Breteuil interrupted him, his voice rising sharply in words which were almost the same as Roop, the valet, had used.

"Monsieur de Saintonge, Monsieur de Saintonge, you did not come to Russia to play the knight-errant to forlorn damsels. But if you do not know the lady's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name, no doubt Roop—your Roop—can tell us. He is well trained, is Roop, and knows his work."

"She is Mademoiselle Khitrovin," replied Saintonge stiffly.

It was evident that any further effort at concealment would only lead to a dangerous misconstruction, as well as, possibly, to awkward questions.

"Mademoiselle Khitrovin? The little German's new maid of honour? Better and better!" cried Breteuil. "Orloff will meet her daily and we will egg him on to fresh folly, fresh importunity, though from what I know of him he'll need no spur."

"But, Monsieur, it is impossible," and Saintonge leaned forward, his face flushed with anger. But Breteuil, mistaking his meaning, sharply motioned him to silence.

"Quite possible, quite: I know Orloff. That the stakes are a Queen's favour and the danger great will be spice to his palate."

"I did not speak of Orloff. I spoke of Mademoiselle Khitrovin."

"Perhaps," answered Breteuil thoughtfully. "But we must do the best we can. Nor do we need her complacency. A hint here, a hint there, a shrug, a lifted eyebrow, a tongue in the cheek, a suggestion that she is complacent, even a compromising silence—no! I do not think it is impossible."

"I meant that it is impossible for us—for honourable men—to conspire against a woman's peace, a woman's reputation."

"Oh, that? Once already I have told you that Quixote is dead."

"But chivalry lives," retorted Saintonge, and even as he spoke he was conscious that in his mouth the words rang utterly false.

How Roop—his Roop, as Breteuil called him—would have grinned at the sentiment! He would not have

laughed. Roop rarely laughed. He was one of those who know that the power of ridicule is in inverse ratio to its noisiness. The guffaw is a bludgeon to bruise thick heads ; but the sneering, smiling jest stabs like a rapier which has been poisoned at the point. But again Breteuil saw the flaw just as Roop would have seen it.

"Chivalry ?" he scoffed. "What the deuce have you to do with chivalry ? Is it for chivalry you are in Petersburg ? Let us face facts and use plain words. What were you before Choiseul lifted you out of your mud ? What brought you to Russia ? Whose pay is in your pocket, and for what has it bought you ? Let us have no mock squeamishness, Monsieur de Saintonge. To others you may be the thistledown of Provence if you will, but to me you are the penniless adventurer, the man who has pawned himself for a lined purse, the hireling of a disreputable intrigue. You to talk of chivalry—you ! Faugh ! let us have done with such hypocrisy. Have you seen a dog snatch a bone from the gutter, careless of its filth if only it stayed its stomach ? Or have you turned coward ? Hey, is that it ? Are you gallant only in the amorous sense ? Having taken your pay—and spent it !—are you beginning now to count the cost ? Have you learned that there is a risk and that it is great ? Oh ! but there is cost, too, on the other side of the account. Reckon it up, Monsieur de Saintonge, reckon it up, before you air your chivalry. The Duc de Choiseul is not the sort of man to be lightly cheated—swindled—fleeced ; plain words for plain facts, Monsieur de Saintonge : let us face them, I say again. The King of France has a long arm when he chooses to stretch it out. Let a hint reach the Czar that this thistledown of Provence has come by way of Paris for you know what, and you will disappear, leaving no more trace than a shadow leaves on a wall when it flits. Have you heard of Schlusselburg ? Of Siberia ? And if you escape these, what of Monsieur de Laval ?

Have you counted the cost there, and what you stand to lose by failure or evasion? Count it, I say, count it. You see, I know more than you thought. The ears of France in Russia hear echoes from Paris at times. Chivalry? Bah! let us have no more of that nonsense."

Through the outpouring of Breteuil's contempt, an outpouring delivered with a harsh, incisive vivacity which pushed home his bristling points with relentless clearness, Saintonge sat gripping his chair with both hands, his teeth set, his nostrils wide, his eyes staring. A lie may move a man's righteous anger, but it is the truth which cuts deepest. And what held Saintonge silent was that the truth was as remorseless as it was truculent. Breteuil had ruthlessly left out of sight the pleasant subterfuge of a great work done for France, and with brutal frankness had stripped bare the sordid realities which lay at the basis of his acceptance of the mission. In the naked light of day their ugliness was an outrage.

To almost every man, at one time or another, in one form or another, there comes this choice—shall he compel his necessities, or shall his necessities compel him? Saintonge knew he had chosen the latter; he knew, too, that it was now too late to turn back. When a man has once deliberately said "No!" to the good in him, nature has a way of holding him to his negative to the bitter end, and if there be a way of salvation at all it is through agony of soul. There was once a man who found no place of repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears, and he is the father of many children, and will be, while the world lasts. That day in Versailles had been a doomsday. Then he might have refused; no man with three such assets as he possessed in their fullness—youth, health, and strength—need despair. Yes! then he might have refused, might have saved his honour; but now his honour bound him to dis-

honour. Breteuil was right. He had taken Choiseul's pay and spent it, and a man must earn his wages or be a thief. Then there was Laval. But for the moment Laval counted for comparatively little; he owed Laval nothing he could not pay. As to the threat of Choiseul's vengeance should he prove recalcitrant, a threat naked and brutal as the truth had been, it troubled him not at all; physically, at least, Saintonge was no coward, and Choiseul had warned him of his danger.

"Well," he said at last, controlling his voice by an effort, "let us admit that we have no chivalry either of us!"

"If you loved the girl, it would be different," answered Breteuil; "but two days ago you had never even heard of her."

"If your 'if' were true, I would kill Orloff tomorrow."

"And kill your own prospect with him?"

"But," said Saintonge, speaking less sullenly as a new thought struck him, "are we not going too fast? This Orloff has been frightened off once already: why not again?"

But Breteuil shook his head. He had borne without remonstrance Saintonge's contemptuous assumption of moral identity with himself. With the Pompadour and Louis behind the project a quarrel with their tool was not to be thought of. Besides, after all, Saintonge was of better birth than himself, and the age was the reverse of prudish. Men—and women, too—thought it no shame to climb to high place by crooked ways, and once there the world welcomed them with both hands, shouting applause at their successful audacity.

"There are undercurrents which I do not fully understand," he said, speaking with a slow gravity; "but I see them gather strength, and some day they may sweep away a throne. Orloff, that night you met him, was on his way—I do not know where or to whom. He

could tell us, or the Empress, for I don't doubt he was carrying out her orders. It was some swirl in those currents which baffle me. I can say no more, but the one unforgivable sin with Catherine is the thwarting of her ambition, and so for that time Orloff gave way."

"Conspiracy?" said Saintonge.

"I do not say so. But two months ago she was a prey to open doubt and torn by apprehensions she could not hide. It was pitiable to see her terrors. Now all that is changed. Little by little she is winning the Emperor's friends from him, and, if I read the signs aright, she will end up by being as loved as he is despised. Her terrors are disappearing, and I, who know her courage, her resource, her audacity, her unscrupulous ambition, I—suspect. There is nothing small about Catherine; her vengeance will be as hot as her passions, and if I were Peter I would remember whom I had frightened, and I would be horribly afraid."

"Conspiracy," repeated Saintonge. "But what is Orloff?"

"Pompadour in Russia. Now you understand to what use we can put this girl. Through her Catherine may grow jealous; Choiseul's plan is not impossible. Much lies with yourself. Play your part well, and to pique Orloff, or for your own sake, the Empress will show you favour, and France will be in the ascendant."

"But the power lies with the Emperor?"

Again Breteuil made a negative gesture.

"He knows she has his intellect ten times over. For that reason—it is a common trick with small minds—he thwarts and even insults her in public, but when the curtain is down she is a power. Gain the Empress, and if he will do nothing for France he will attempt nothing against us. That will give us time, and time is on our side. Have I not told you how the balance is swaying? Let us hold him neutral for six months, and——"

"And?" repeated Saintonge as Breteuil paused, shaking an uplifted finger towards him.

"What did the Pompadour say? *Apres nous la Deluge!* But let the deluge come! It will not be us whom the flood will sweep away. Now, Monsieur de Saintonge, the sooner the siege begins the better. You were quite right: if we are to succeed we must work together. If a few minutes ago I spoke strongly—too strongly—it was, you will admit, under provocation. Let us forget all that."

"As you please," answered Saintonge stiffly; "but please understand I still object to a woman's name and hônour being dragged into this."

"Well, well: go your own way to work. Now listen to me. Two days hence Vorontsof, the Chancellor, gives a supper-party to their Majesties. For my young compatriot, newly arrived from Provence, I can easily procure an invitation. Dress your best, play your hardest, drink your deepest, flatter your loudest, your grossest. Tell Peter that Prussia is the Garden of Eden and Frederick its Archangel Michael holding the world in awe with sword of fire; tell Catherine every good Frenchman thirsts for Versailles, but that for you St. Petersburg has quenched desire. To him, jeer at women as toys—toys—toys, poor inferior creatures of a limited capacity when matched with men, and incapable of original thought. If he is sufficiently drunk he will believe you, and remember you next day as a man of parts. To her, dilate upon Russia, its undeveloped greatness, its magnificent resources, its splendid possibilities, its glorious future, if only—then pause and, with a glance at Peter, let your eyes speak your thought. She is an adept in such language, the eloquence of eye and gesture, and will understand you; she has to be an adept, being the Empress—and Catherine! How else could Poniatowski, Orloff and the rest have said, 'I love you!'"

"And she, too, will believe me?"

"Yes, because it is true."

Breteuil had risen, and at the hint of dismissal Saintonge also rose to his feet. He had asked his question cynically, but the cynicism had fallen flat. Breteuil had dropped his lighter vein, and his voice was now earnest with conviction.

"She is a great woman, a grand woman. I do believe her passions are but the exuberance of nature cramped in its legitimate outlet. They are her playthings, she their mistress. Some call her the new Messalina, but to me she is a Semiramis in the making."

Closing the door behind Saintonge, Breteuil returned to his chair, and, leaning back in it, his elbows on its arms, sat staring into vacancy. Better than Choiseul he understood how urgent was the necessity that Russia, if not the avowed friend of France, should, at least, not be allied in a campaign of offence with a probable enemy so powerful as Frederick. Nor had he any illusions as to the hope of winning the Emperor from his infatuation for Prussia: it was too gross, too open, too deeply rooted. The ribbon of the Black Eagle was the only order he wore; on his finger was a ring set with Frederick's portrait. No! to sway the Czar was impossible, and in six months there would be war—unless within six months these undercurrents of which he had spoken had swept away a throne.

Rousing himself, he sat up. Roop must watch Saintonge.

"It almost seems to me as if the man has a conscience. That would never do, never, never."

And at that moment Saintonge, in the street, suddenly remembered that he had forgotten Roop altogether.

CHAPTER XII

A CAMPAIGN BEGUN

"YONDER is Vorontsof," said Breteuil as he and Saintonge entered the Chancellor's reception-room, "the full-lipped man with the blue ribbon of Saint Andrew. His niece, you know, is the Czar's very dear friend and a would-be Pompadour. I will present you to him, but after that you must shift for yourself. It is etiquette that the diplomatic body should be near the Chancellor when he receives the Emperor, and he, of course, must stand at the door. But stay, there is Kasbek; he is one of us and will look after you."

No signal passed which Saintonge detected, but a man of rather more than his own age left one of the many groups scattered through the room, and lounged in Breteuil's direction. Instead of joining them, however, he would have passed idly on had not Breteuil caught him by the arm.

"What news have you, Kasbek?"

"None, Baron, none: except that the sun still rises in the south-west over Potsdam and never sets. Its beams are rather bright for our Russian eyes."

"Then the only remedy is an eclipse," answered Breteuil. "But let me introduce a young countryman of mine, Monsieur de Saintonge. Saintonge, what Monsieur Kasbek does not know of Court sunshine, eclipses, and the gnats which dance in the light is not worth

knowing. Kasbek, Monsieur de Saintonge is a stranger to the capital and a friend of Roop's. I think Choiseul said you knew Roop ? "

" I have a letter to Monsieur Roop, but have not yet met him," answered Saintonge, taking his cue from Breteuil.

" Then, Kasbek, I may leave him to you after I have introduced him to Vorontsof ? Thanks. Come, Saintonge, the Emperor may arrive any moment."

There were three doors to the room, and near one of these—not that by which Breteuil and Saintonge had entered—the Chancellor was standing. It communicated with a second and more private staircase, reserved for the Emperor and his suite. Round Vorontsof was a group of men whose brilliant and varied uniforms unmistakably differentiated them from their fellow-guests ; nor had Saintonge, fresh from similar functions at Versailles, any difficulty in recognising their distinctive position at Court. Across the breast of one was the red-and-white ribbon of Maria Theresa ; from the neck of another hung the Toison d'Or ; yet another displayed the Brandenburg Red Eagle.

At Breteuil's approach Vorontsof came forward to meet him with evident cordiality. It was not his policy to take sides with either party, but, as an opportunist, to make both serve his country's ends, or his own, as best he could.

" You are just in time, Breteuil ; I have word from the palace that the Emperor is already on his way."

" Then before His Majesty arrives give me leave to present Monsieur de Saintonge, and to bespeak your good offices on his behalf. He is a new-comer to St. Petersburg."

" I think he brings his own welcome with him," answered Vorontsof, looking Saintonge kindly in the face as he held out his hand. " I am, as always,

at your service, but — you know the Emperor's humour ? "

" Then, Chancellor, your good offices with the Empress ? The welcome Saintonge brings with him may make him acceptable."

" Ah ha ! Then Monsieur de Saintonge is a lady's man ? "

But though Vorontsof laughed, his second glance was yet more keen and searching than his first. In common with many others the growing domination of Prussia over the Czar galled and humiliated him. Too weak a man and too much afraid of his master to interpose his influence openly, Vorontsof was one of those watchers from the bank who saw the undercurrents gather force, and let them drift without seeking to check them or direct their course.

" I am a Frenchman, your Excellency, and from the south," answered Saintonge gaily. " Need I say more ? "

" And the ardent south is longing to begin the campaign ? You shall have your opportunity after supper, Monsieur de Saintonge. Now, Baron, come, that we may receive their Majesties," and with a smiling nod Vorontsof turned away, followed by Breteuil.

Left alone, Saintonge looked round him curiously. He knew Kasbek was waiting for him, but he was not quite sure that he cared about Kasbek's company. A man may be engaged in a mean action, may be bending all his powers to gain a contemptible end, and yet despise those associated with him in his hope of success. From what had fallen from Breteuil he judged that Kasbek was another Roop, another Russian patriot in the pay of France. He wondered how many more of the crowd which made gay the huge room were like him. For the room was enormous, so enormous that though three hundred guests were present there was no jostling, no thronging. And what was true of the room

was true of all else. Everywhere the prevailing note was size. The mirrors panelling the walls were gigantic, their gilded frames grotesque in their florid breadth. Three ponderous chandeliers, ablaze with light, hung from the painted ceiling whence all Olympus, god-like in their power of rounded limb, gazed down on pigmy man. Groups of statuary, heroic in their proportions, filled the corners, as if Hercules and the Titans stood on guard, looking out on the smaller, meaner race which had followed their own with a half-kindly derision.

After size came colour. The cold, grey north loves to warm its spirit through the eye. Crimson and blue brocades hung between the glaring mirror frames, or drooped, curtaining the doors, caught up by cords of gold. From a thousand points of polished brass the reflected lights of the chandeliers leaped twinkling out. The flesh tints of the gods were rosy pink, amply displayed escaping from flying garments borrowed from the rainbow. Persian and Turkish rugs in every hue were scattered upon the polished floor.

And the women? The men? What better can mortal do than copy Olympus and play the butterfly in a flood of light?

"You laugh?" said Kasbek, taking Saintonge by the arm. "But is that quite fair to us? How old is France? A thousand years from Charlemagne, perhaps. And Russia from Ivan the Great? Three hundred! Compared with you we are children, Monsieur de Saintonge, and, like children, we love show. Besides, the development of nations is along the lines of geometrical progression, always provided——" and he stopped short.

"Provided?" questioned Saintonge.

"They are not governed by fools."

"Or women!" jested Saintonge. "In France we are wise and have the Salic law."

"Yes, for France; but there is no Salic law for your kings!" retorted Kasbek. "Who governs Louis, and

France through him ? You may buy a sneer too cheaply, Monsieur de Saintonge. If salvation ever comes to Russia, it will come by the hand of a woman—and here is the Empress."

Afterwards Saintonge remembered how curiously Kasbek's voice had deepened at the last words, as if by the touch of a sudden emotion which had its genesis in the very roots of his being ; but the sudden and universal stir throughout the room drew away his attention for the moment.

The two-leaved door, in front of which the ambassadors were grouped, had been thrown open, and up the stairway rumbled a fanfare of trumpets, followed by a silence through which Saintonge caught faintly the sound of a shrill, high-pitched, discontented voice. Again Kasbek touched his arm.

" Watch," he whispered, " watch well. What you will see is instructive—to a Frenchman."

" And to a Russian ? "

" Some of us learn—and more are learning."

Through the room there was a faint rustle like a sigh, the movement which thrills a crowd in the moment of expectation ; the shrill voice rose louder, sharper, and Vorontsof entered the room backwards, followed almost to the toes by a meagre, undersized man, extraordinarily thin and pale, hollow-cheeked, and with his narrow face thrust out eagerly before him. He was dressed in the uniform of a Prussian colonel, and across his pinched chest was stretched the orange ribbon of the Black Eagle, his sole decoration.

" Instructive ! " repeated Kasbek, his sarcastic voice grating a little. " Yes, I think so. And certainly some of us are beginning to learn."

The ambassadors were ranged in two lines, one on either side of the doorway, in order of their precedence at Court ; but, darting his head from side to side with the quick motion of an eager bird, Peter pushed un-

heeding past those nearest and selected one, almost the most remote from the entrance, for an effusive greeting, holding out both hands. It was the man with the Brandenburg Eagle on his breast.

" Von Goltz of Potsdam," said Kasbek bitterly, but speaking so low that his words scarcely travelled beyond Saintonge's ear. " See how nobly our divine Emperor supports the dignity of Russia ! Can you wonder that we love and honour him with all reverence as we do ? Listen to his wisdom, and remember that his word is not only law to the nation, but life or death."

" You had letters from the King, our master ? " Peter was saying, and though so puny in body his voice had such a peculiar, penetrating power that the words were clearly heard all over the crowded room. " But I also was favoured ; come, let us tell one another the news," and he took Von Goltz familiarly by the elbow. " No, no, keep aside, keep aside," he cried as Vorontsof ventured an intervention, " this is most important ; it is not every day that the King of Prussia deigns to write to me."

Saintonge had been watching the play of scornful anger on Kasbek's face, speculating upon its true origin, when the expression changed swiftly, and, following the gaze, the Frenchman turned to the door. A woman was standing on the threshold, with Breteuil bending over her hand.

" God save the Empress ! " said Kasbek under his breath.

Saintonge had been in a world of make-believe, looking out on life as a child into the gay colours and changing forms of a kaleidoscope shaken by an unseen hand. Now, with a word, Kasbek dragged him back to realities. The Empress ! Breteuil's phrase came back to him : Messalina or Semiramis ? Whichever she was, she was the woman who would make or spoil his fortunes, the woman through whom he would altogether

lose, or one day comfortably fill, the golden shoes of his uncle Laval. No wonder he analysed her with eager speculation as she turned from Breteuil and held out a hand to Almadovar, the Spaniard.

But a keen disappointment waited him. He had hoped for some lure of beauty to compel his unwilling admiration, and draw him onward by a primrose path where he might forget his self-contempt. Breteuil, Choiseul had said, was quite enthusiastic about her, and in such a case as his own a little enthusiasm would excuse a large unworthiness of purpose. But she left him cold. He could see no inspiration, no allurement, no conventional excuse, in the masculine German face, the short, heavily-built figure with its too broad shoulders and almost gross depth of bosom. A wave of repulsion swept through him, whether at her or the part he was called to play he did not wait to determine, and half involuntarily he shifted his gaze. It fell on Ulrica Khitrovin as she followed Catherine, and as the two women paused, almost side by side, Saintonge understood as by a revelation the true conflict which lay before him.

"I do not think your Empress——" he began. But as he turned to Kasbek the look on the Russian's face closed his lips. If this was another Roop, then Roop was not the intriguer for hire he had taken him to be.

In Paris, if not throughout France, religion was almost dead. It was the age in which it was said of a priest, "What a bigot he is; he actually believes in a God!" But if Faith lay *in extremis* upon a bed of rationalism, it was still the fashion to attend in public the churches whose ministrations were a private jest. There, on a certain feast day, Saintonge had seen in a woman's eyes, upturned to the downward gaze of the dying Christ as He hung from His cross of wood, a passionate, quenchless adoration which was love and worship in one, but

not of this world, not of the flesh, and purified from all gross tincture. It was the yearning of spirit crying to spirit across that gulf which spirit alone may pass. So was it now with Kasbek. The tender depth in his eyes was not the tenderness of a man for a woman as passion understands such tenderness. His very face glowed, and Saintonge heard him murmur a second time under his breath, "God save the Empress!"

With his curiosity newly roused he turned to scrutinise Catherine afresh. Roop, Orloff, Kasbek! the bribed intriguer, the ambitious adventurer, and—Kasbek! She had bought them all, and at what a differing cost for two of them he could guess, but what was Kasbek's price? Already he was sure that Kasbek was not a second Roop. What price, then? What? But the Czar's shrill voice broke into the question, leaving it unanswered for the time.

"Now, Vorontsof, we have had our talk, Goltz and I, and can go to supper. Let us have no ceremony; you know I hate it. Von Goltz will sit on one side of me, and your niece, the Countess Vorontsova, on the other; the rest where they like. And after supper we shall all be good comrades, just as I am with my Holsteiners."

"In that case," said Kasbek, "we shall all be drunk in less than an hour, and beasts in two. Monsieur de Saintonge, have you ever seen an Emperor drunk? No? It's an inspiring sight. How behind the times you are at Versailles! No wonder you come to Petersburg to be educated in polite manners. There! the doors of the supper-room are open. Let us try and get places near the Empress. As you heard, she is left to shift for herself."

"Yes," said Saintonge, his mind full of a double purpose, "let us try and get near the Empress by all means."

Where the Empress was, there, too, would be her ladies, or, more particularly, Ulrica Khitrovin; he

might also, if the proximity excited frankness, discover the root of Kasbek's enthusiasm.

The third door had been thrown open, and, following Peter, the guests were trooping into the further room without regard for precedence. The Czar's dislike to formality was well known. According to custom, his place, with two or three covers on either side for guests of his own choosing, was alone reserved : the remainder seated themselves where they pleased.

Fortune—or Kasbek's skill and experience—favoured Saintonge. Joining with the staff immediately behind Catherine, he found himself placed next to Mademoiselle Khitrovin, and with Kasbek at his other elbow. The Empress was opposite, a few seats lower down. In the confusion, coupled with the bewilderment of so many strange faces, the girl had allowed herself to be piloted to her place by one of the suite without perceiving who was her neighbour, and for the moment Saintonge preferred to keep silence.

He was conscious of a growing sense of nervous strain. It was as if he groped his way across a strange room in the darkness, uncertain what moment a trap might open at his feet, but what it was he dreaded he did not know. Some dangers are spiritually discerned, and at times our instinct fails ; others—less to be feared—rise threatening and open to the eye. With Saintonge it was the former, and yet, as he looked up and down the length of the long table, which stretched from end to end of the room, broken here and there by passage-ways, it was difficult to imagine a scene freer from constraint, or in which anxiety could play a smaller part. The Emperor, the storm-centre of possible danger, was chatting gaily, now to Mademoiselle Vorontsof, now to Von Goltz, talking incessantly and indifferent to an answer, as was his wont. Everywhere there was laughter, everywhere the babble of careless voices, the clatter of plates, the tinkling of glasses ; lights blazed from silver

candelabra and hanging lamps; the air was full of the scent of flowers. Profusion had stolen luxury from the East, West, and South, and laid the theft in the lap of frivolous pleasure. And yet, by instinct, Saintonge felt certain that somewhere, immaterialised, the skull and mockery of death were present.

CHAPTER XIII

GOD SAVE THE EMPRESS!

BUT if Saintonge counted upon Kasbek to assist him by either hint or confidence to some solution he was much mistaken. Avoiding everything of an intimate nature, the Russian plunged at once into such gossip of a supper-table as might naturally be supposed to interest a stranger.

"As a new-comer you cannot know many who are here, so let me introduce you! The lady on the Czar's right hand is the Chancellor's niece. She is also—but you can guess that for yourself. You observe she is pock-marked, squints, is as fat as a buttered sausage and as shapeless as a half-filled meal-bag. I can assure you her graces of mind almost equal those of face and person, but not quite, and I raise my glass in honour of the Emperor's taste. That white-haired man next her is Munnich, and there you have Russia in a crystal, or our system of government incarnate. Yesterday he was in Siberia, to-day he sups with His Majesty, to-morrow—but let to-morrow care for itself! Who knows where some of us will digest our suppers, or pass the to-morrows of our lives! In Russia, Monsieur de Saintonge, a man should never think of to-morrow, lest the fear of to-morrow should paralyse to-day. It is our to-morrows which make men cowards. Now skip a dozen or so of nonentities, the noughts after the unit which give it value. You see a big man——"

"Yes, said Sa"intonge, "Orloff? I know him."

"And you are not three days in St. Petersburg? Who else do you know?"

"I have seen Roop, though we have not met. Tell me something about Roop."

"Not here. But he is a very honest man. You may trust Roop, Monsieur de Saintonge."

At the use of his name Saintonge felt, rather than saw, Mademoiselle Khitrovin start, and next moment a voice —a very sweet voice, he thought—said softly:

"Have you found it yet, Monsieur de Saintonge?"

"Found what, Mademoiselle?" answered Saintonge, promptly whipping round, and leaving Kasbek to himself without a scruple.

"The pleasure you break your bones travelling in search of?"

"Only within this last hour."

"I think you said something like that once before. But perhaps it has a new meaning, and you find a greater pleasure in crowds than I do, Monsieur de Saintonge."

"The pleasure of a crowd, Mademoiselle, is that it is the truest solitude of two."

"Now you talk nonsense."

The words were the merest banter of the supper-table, and she knew it; but an inflexion in Saintonge's voice which was not banter, and which had found its way there in spite of himself, brought the colour to her cheeks. Looking past Saintonge, she glanced towards the Empress as if speculating whether she would hear and approve, and, following the glance, Saintonge changed the subject for his own purpose.

"Monsieur Vorontsof has promised to present me after supper."

"And you will fall in love with her."

"I?" cried Saintonge, startled out of his raillery by the pertinence of the sudden suggestion. "I fall in love

with the Empress! Now it is you who are talking nonsense."

"Wait," she said significantly, but it was a laughing significance and void of all ill-natured meaning; "just wait, and you will see I am right."

"Never! I do not like dumpy Germans with double chins."

"Fie, Monsieur, you are not polite! And you will find I am right. Three days ago I came to St. Petersburg in terror of her and of everything; now——"

"Yes?" said Saintonge as she paused. "Tell me something of yourself. We are old friends, or, at least, you are my oldest friend in Russia."

Saintonge was right. They were as much alone as in the inn of Povolsk. Left to himself, Kasbek was absorbed in thought; if now and then he roused himself from his abstraction, it was to scrutinise Peter, whose harsh, shrill voice rose almost incessantly above the din of the surrounding merriment.

"There is very little to tell," she answered. "All my life I have lived in the country, about forty miles on this side of Moscow."

"And you travelled all that distance alone?"

"You forget Dmitry," and she laughed. "Dmitry is a man of one idea; whatever Mademoiselle Ulrica does is right, and he would die to maintain it."

"But Monsieur Dmitry is only one man."

"My father is poor, Monsieur de Saintonge, and could afford no more. There are six of us at home—but that cannot interest you."

"Try me," answered Saintonge; and now there was no banter, no mock gallantry, in his voice.

Perhaps she felt not so much a solitude in the crowd of strangers surrounding them as a solitariness; perhaps, though they had met but twice, what had then happened had broken down restraining barriers between them. But very simply, very frankly, she took him at his word,

and Saintonge, taught by the wistful eyes, the unconscious hesitancies of the voice, the tender curves of the mouth as she spoke, understood how sorrowful had been the parting, and how dreaded the journey of which she made so light. It was the old story of two reckless generations drawing bills on futurity to the ruin of their successor; but of that she said little, and that little without bitterness. As a living body is drained of its blood, so the huge family estate had been exhausted, and it was her father's life's work to nurse it back to strength. There was no mother, and again the mouth grew tender: she, being the eldest, could remember the loss. Being the eldest, too, it had devolved on her to play the mother's part.

As he listened Saintonge understood why two natures seemed to dwell in the one body. At times she was burdened with gravity far beyond her years, then across the too early shadows a flash of girlish gaiety would break, and lo! she was a child at heart. Yes, that was it—a woman and yet a child. The soul had grown older than her years through the daily thought for others, the daily pinch and watchfulness, while the spirit had always clung fast to its unexpended heritage of youth, but it had been a grey existence. Then, into the rigorous simplicity of their lives had come the command from the Empress.

"You cannot think how frightened I was—frightened of the journey, frightened of the Empress, but frightened most of all of this, and all this means," and she glanced round the table. "But we dared not refuse."

"I admit the danger," said Saintonge.

If to him St. Petersburg was a shuttered room across which he groped his way, conscious of pitfalls, what might such a court prove to a girl like Ulrica Khitrovin, country-bred, and ignorant of her hazards?

"My father used to say: 'A man has his sword, but a woman has only her pride in herself, and if either be

lost in the struggle, then God help the man or the woman.'"

"Then," said Saintonge softly, "I do not think you need be afraid."

"Oh, I am not so frightened as I was. Thanks to a brave French gentleman, the journey is over without harm. And I am very grateful, Monsieur de Saintonge; you do believe me, don't you? I see him further down the table. How can such men be? Are they men at all or are they—are they just beasts? Is it very dreadful of me to say such a thing?"

"Forget him, Mademoiselle. Believe me, he is best forgotten."

"But there is so much I wish to remember. Then I was terrified of the Empress, but she is kinder than kindness." For a moment she paused, then her face kindled enthusiastically. "You cannot think how kind she is—how great she is. I have only known her three days, but I see it already. You call her dull, stupid, heavy, but you do not know her. Nor do you know the life she leads, you do not know how abominably——"

But the Emperor was on his feet, and as if by instinct the babble of the room was hushed to silence. In his hand was a glass filled so full, and held so unsteadily, that the contents slopped upon the table in purple splashes. For a moment he waited, swaying from his knees, his mouth twitching, his thin, eager face pushed from side to side in his queer bird-like movement; then, with a flourish which again spilt the wine, he raised the glass.

"I drink to the Imperial Family!" he cried.

At the words there was a rustle of silks, and all rose to their feet except the Empress. "To the Imperial Family!" boomed round the table, and again there was a silence. But Peter, when he had emptied and set down his glass, still kept his feet. His glazed eyes were red-rimmed, and already he was half drunk, but the

flush on his prominent cheek-bones had more of temper in it than of wine. All recognised the signs and many held their breath. Where would the explosion burst? In which direction would the lightning strike? Whom would it destroy? Kasbek's half-jesting words came back forcibly to Saintonge's mind, and with a special emphasis. For, as the silence grew yet more intense, Kasbek caught him by the arm.

But the thunderbolt lingered. The Czar had a new thought, or rather his purpose had amplified since he had emptied his glass. With a jerk of his head Peter called Gudovich, his adjutant, who stood behind his chair, and whispered in his ear. Whatever was the order, Gudovich remonstrated, also in a whisper.

"Do as you're bid," said Peter harshly.

And, driven by compulsion, Gudovich obeyed, but with such evident reluctance that his movements were too slow to please his master. Leaning one hand on the table, the Czar stretched out the other arm to its full length, pointing at Catherine.

"Up on your feet, get up, get up, you there! Are my uncles not also of the Imperial Family? Why did you not stand up in their honour? You are a fool—a fool! Do you hear what I say? Fool! fool! fool!"

A sound like a sigh, or a deep-drawn breath, broke the hush, a sigh that might have been relief, an indrawn breath that might have been fear of what would follow, and Kasbek's grip tightened on Saintonge's arm—tightened so that for days afterwards the finger-marks showed in bruises upon the flesh.

"It must be!" he said in a whisper. "By God! it must be: there is no alternative." Then Saintonge heard him moan, with a little convulsion of the throat, as if he choked. Once he had seen a man die from the thrust of a sword in the chest, and the rattle in his throat, as the lungs fought for air through the flow of blood, was like Kasbek's catching at breath.

Following the Czar's gesture, every face, except Kasbek's, was turned on Catherine, but his gaze never moved from the Emperor. For a moment she endured the dumb scrutiny unflinchingly, and, as Saintonge watched her—the whole scene, with its forecast of a trail of blood and subversal of a throne, did not outlast ten seconds—he began to understand Ulrica Khitrovin's enthusiasm. The man might be the Emperor and hold all lives in pawn, but the woman was greater than the man: yes, and immeasurably greater. The heavy, massive face grew august in its outraged dignity. Into the tired eyes there leaped such a sudden energy of passionate protest that they glowed like stars; across the dead white of the skin swept a red tide of curbed emotion, which might be wrath, which might be shame, but which was not fear. Yet, while all waited for the biting, bitter retort which might provoke a decisive, even a fatal rupture, suddenly the full red mouth trembled, a quiver of pain made pitiful the stern surprise of the face, and a rush of tears sprang to her eyes as she lowered her head upon her hands, sobbing as a woman sobs whose heart is torn.

With a wide-mouthed, cackling laugh, and a triumphant, significant shake of Elizabeth Vorontsof's nude shoulder—in itself a greater insult than the insult—Peter sat back into his chair. The victory was his, Catherine had wept at his censure, and he was indeed the Emperor! The King of Chaldea could see the writing on the wall, but Peter was blind.

"No alternative," repeated Kasbek, still staring at the Emperor as if fascinated. "No, by God! none, none." Drawing a decanter of wine to him, he filled a tumbler and drank noisily in gulps, as if in his parched thirst he failed to control his gullet.

But Saintonge was occupied with Ulrica Khitrovin.

"With your leave, Mademoiselle, we shall drink a health, you and I. Partly because you are paler than

you should be—no doubt it is the heat of the room—and partly because I have changed my mind. That is said to be a lady's privilege; but at times a man may change his mind, may he not? Your glass is ready? To the happiness of Her Sacred Majesty! God save the Empress!"

"I knew she would win you," answered the girl, wetting her lips with the wine he had poured out.

"My head? Yes, courage will always win a man's head. But my heart? There I drink a different name." And when he had set down his glass again the colour had come back to Ulrica Khitrovin's pale cheeks.

CHAPTER XIV

THE ATMOSPHERE THICKENS

THAT the constraint which followed Peter's outburst might be more easily shaken off, the supper-party, at Von Goltz's instigation, broke up early, returning to the reception-room. Here card-tables of varying sizes had been laid out, the larger for Campis, rocambole, and other round games, the smaller for whist, Boston, or piquet. At either end of the room were buffets with liquors and salt relishes to excite thirst; while footmen, carrying gaily-decorated baskets of Dutch pipes and tobacco, mingled with the guests.

It was the Emperor's best-beloved hour of the twenty-four. In it his last few shreds of dignity were eagerly flung aside, and with the irresponsibility of a child he abandoned himself to the first mad caprice which influenced his unbalanced mind. But first he must play, and once he was absorbed in his favourite game of Campis the anxious tension of the supper-room visibly slackened: when the wolf sleeps, lesser beasts lose their terrors.

"Come," said Vorontsof, taking Saintonge by the arm, "I must redeem my promise to Monsieur de Breteuil."

"Your promise?"

"To present you to the Empress. Had you forgotten? That is not very gallant, Monsieur de Saint-

onge. I thought all Frenchmen were courtiers by instinct."

"I admit, Chancellor, that in certain essentials our instincts appear to differ from yours," answered Saintonge tartly. Mademoiselle Khitrovin would, no doubt, be in attendance on her mistress, and in the embarrassment of the position he sought a way of even temporary escape. "After what has passed, perhaps Her Majesty would wish to be spared the presentation of a stranger."

"That? Oh! The Emperor has already forgotten all about it."

"And the Empress?"

"She is too wise to remember."

"Such Christian charity on both sides is delightful," said Saintonge gravely. "Then you are sure she will not object, or think it an intrusion?"

"Quite sure: you may even serve as a diversion. At least, so I understood from Breteuil."

Though Vorontsof spoke with an entire absence of emphasis, the word was too apt to have been used haphazard. A diversion! It was his rôle to the letter, and as they threaded their way between the now animated groups, the men puffing vigorously at their long clay pipes in emulation of the Czar as they laughed and chattered with the women, Saintonge felt that the mental atmosphere was as heavily charged as the smoky air which irritated his lungs.

There were many things to fret, exasperate, and excite uncertainty. What part did Vorontsof play—Vorontsof, whose niece was the Madame Pompadour of the Winter Palace, and who yet introduced Breteuil's protégé to Catherine as a diversion? As a diversion from what? From the memory of Peter's insult or from Orloff's influence? Orloff, whom he saw standing at the buffet, drinking with a copious thirst, the centre of a group of guardsmen. In any case, and apart from

either application of the word, he would have to reckon with Orloff, because of Dolgoburg. The intensity of his antipathy admitted of no truce upon his side, and Orloff was not the type of man who leaves a balked passion or whim, call it what you like, unavenged. But that did not disturb him. It pleased him, rather, to feel unashamed of their cause of quarrel.

The smallness of the group gathered round Catherine's chair was significant. Unpopularity, as a Court disease, is dangerously catching, and few of Vorontsof's guests cared to risk infection. In Russia it was peculiarly fatal, and because of it many had been known to die of cold in Siberia; or by swifter methods, of which few even whispered, in the dungeons of Schlusselburg. Kasbek was faithful, and some of her immediate suite were in attendance a few paces distant; but none envied Saintonge his doubtful and perhaps dangerous honour.

"Madame," said Vorontsof, "with your permission, and at Monsieur de Breteuil's request, I present to you his countryman, Monsieur de Saintonge."

"Thank God it is not another Prussian!" answered Catherine brusquely. "What brings you to Russia, Monsieur de Saintonge?"

"Pleasure, Madame."

"And have you found it?"

Almost word for word it was Ulrica Khitrovin's question, but the rough contempt in Catherine's voice entirely changed its significance.

"Everything is so novel, Madame."

"I trust so: yes, I trust so." Her face hardened, taking on that masculine look which at first had struck Saintonge with a repugnance. But her eyes flashed, and he saw it was with difficulty that she controlled her temper. To be humiliated was galling, but to be humiliated in public before a stranger in search of novelty was salt to the wound. She had spoken to herself rather

than to him; now she burst out in a gust of rude and savage irony. "Well, you have seen Petersburg, you have had your novelty; what keeps you here?"

"Devotion, Madame."

She had raised her eyes to his in the angry challenge of a woman outraged but defiant, her clear white skin flushed with the passions which shook her, and which she was at no pains to conceal. But now she softened, and the virile strength of her face grew curiously gentle. Catherine was, as Breteuil had hinted, an expert in the comprehension of expression, as most women are where a man is concerned: a woman they do not understand so easily; possibly because they do not always understand themselves. It would be too much to say that she read his word in his face—Mademoiselle Khitrovin may have seen something of the sort at supper—but she saw sympathy, which is its substitute and near neighbour.

"Devotion?" she repeated, an alert interest growing in her scrutiny. Her eyes never left his face, but her comprehension grasped the easy, graceful set of the broad shoulders, the muscular power hidden behind the silks and laces, and Catherine loved a man to look a man. "Then, Monsieur de Saintonge, you, who are in search of novelty, bring your novelty with you."

From behind Catherine's chair Mademoiselle Khitrovin leaned forward and downward.

"Monsieur de Saintonge is not singular, Madame, I pray you believe that," she said, her voice vibrating with the emotion she did not attempt to suppress; and the hard face of the elder woman softened yet more.

"But—Monsieur de Saintonge? Why Monsieur de Saintonge? Have you met before, you two?"

"At Dolgoburg, Madame, I had the honour."

It was Saintonge who answered; the girl had already drawn back a step behind her former position.

"At Dolgoburg?" Twisting round in her chair,

Catherine looked back across her shoulder. "Child, you never told me—but never mind now, you can tell me later; and was there ever a woman who had not her secrets! Monsieur de Saintonge, you who are so lately from France, and must know the weakness of poor women, you will come and tell us all about the newest fashions? You might not think it, but we adore French fashions—some of us," she added after a pause. "I will give orders that you are to have the *entrée*, and we shall expect you to-morrow without fail."

"The Emperor has lost," said Vorontsof, interposing before Saintonge could reply; "only Messieurs les Ambassadeurs appear to be playing. Madame, may I be excused?"

"Yes, Chancellor, go, go. You have been to Versailles, Monsieur de Saintonge?"

"Yes, Madame."

"And, apart from the novelty you have so soon discovered, how does Petersburg compare?"

"Alas! Madame, there we have no such Queen."

"No," she answered, adding with bitter sarcasm as Peter's sharp voice made itself heard, "nor such a King. Yours is called the Well-Beloved."

"Madame, is that wise?"

"Oh! I have friends, and I am not afraid."

"Friends who would die for you, I am sure."

"But I want them to live. Monsieur Kasbek, do you hear me?" There was no special significance in her tone, but afterwards Saintonge wondered if for Kasbek the words had not a double meaning. "Men please me better than ghosts, living hearts than dying memories. Give me flesh and blood, Monsieur, and not theories, not phrases. Phrases? Theories? In Russia we die of them."

She did not seem to require an answer, and in the silence which followed Saintonge allowed his gaze to wander, like hers, round the room. Versailles? With

what pungent satire Madame de Luxembourg, or old Richelieu, would have ridiculed a comparison between such robust coarseness and the distilled refinement of the French Court! It was as a Satyr to Hyperion, a half-drunken Reine des Halles to Madame Pompadour, a Montmartre cabaret to—well, to Versailles! Yes, that was nearest it, a Montmartre cabaret on a gigantic scale, but Montmartre in a masquerade of silks and satins.

Through an atmosphere so grey with tobacco smoke that Saintonge's eyes smarted, gaily dressed women and uniformed men armed with Dutch clays promenaded up and down, talking with that loud absence of restraint which more than hinted the wine they had drunk. Round every table were groups, intently silent over the turn of the cards, or wrangling in dispute upon bets newly won or lost. Everywhere there was the jingle of money, the sudden rough oath rapped frankly out as the tide of fortune ran low, with here and there the burst of a drinking-song, or a shout of unmeaning laughter from the already drunken. Others had passed beyond that stage and lay propped in corners, or sprawling beneath the table where they had fallen.

"Montmartre!" said Saintonge to himself. "Montmartre naked to the gaze and brutally unashamed!" and turned again to Catherine. But there was no disgust on her face, no repulsion, only an intent anxiety as Kasbek, leaning across her shoulder from behind, whispered in her ear. What he said did not reach Saintonge, but he spoke rapidly, urgently, as if pressing home an argument with all his powers of emphasis. She made no answer in words, but from the movement of her head she agreed, though with reluctance and disquietude, for the lines on the forehead deepened and the full red lips grew thin in their compression. Then her face flushed with protest. But not angrily, for the dark eyes grew tender and the hard mouth softened again as she shook

her head. It was as if in her heart she said a reluctant "No," while her head consented.

"Yes, Madame, yes," insisted Kasbek, "you must listen to me and you must not say 'No.' What passed to-night has made it necessary."

"But some one must suffer," she answered, "and I have so few friends."

"And for what are friends but to prove themselves friends even though they suffer?" he retorted. "In all seriousness, Madame, would you have us fold our arms and do nothing? Nor need harm follow."

"Hush!" she said, lifting her hand in warning, but to Saintonge it seemed there was acquiescence in her tone.

From time to time the Emperor's voice had made itself heard, even above the riotous din, in a little high-pitched scream of laughter, a trooper's oath, or a sudden harsh burst of words. Now again it rose, but with a note of splenetic triumph.

"Spain will win; matched against France, Spain will always win. What do you say, Von Goltz?"

The Prussian's reply was inaudible. But though, no doubt, it was diplomatic in tone, it did not please Peter. Perhaps its very conciliation irritated him.

"Luck? A mere game? A fig for your luck! A fig for your mere game! Luck or no luck, a mere game or reality, here or elsewhere, Spain would win."

"And yet," said Breteuil sarcastically, "even Colonel Von Goltz was worsted early in the struggle."

"Hey? Why is everyone so vexed with Prussia? For my part, I would follow the King of Prussia even to Hell itself!"

"Then let us hope the present peace will endure, your Majesty, so that there may be no such claims on your ardent devotion."

"Peace?" broke out Peter furiously. "Yes, that is what I mean to have. But if not, it will be a bad business for you."

"Oh, Sire, you jest."

"I? No such thing. Monsieur de Breteuil, I am a soldier and don't joke."

Controlling his temper, Breteuil turned with a shrug to Vorontsof, who had joined the group.

"Chancellor, I must report this to my master."

Vorontsof's reply, like Von Goltz's, was inaudible to Saintonge; no doubt it, too, was diplomatic and conciliatory. To more than Roop there fell the thankless task of patching botched jobs. But Peter was in no mood to listen to his Chancellor's smooth platitudes. Pipe in hand, he was strutting up and down the room, well pleased at the courage with which he had defended the uniform he wore.

Already the night had taught Saintonge much, but in these three minutes he had learned much more. "Gain the Emperor," Choiseul had said; "but that you may gain the Emperor, gain the Empress first; the woman's influence will win the man." Founded on wide knowledge, the argument was sound. But there was one flaw—the woman was the wrong woman. For once the Duke, for all his experience, had failed to be sufficiently cynical.

But just as the scene at the supper-table had told Saintonge that Catherine's influence with Peter was not worth the winning, so this later passage had taught him how urgent was the need to gain the Czar at any cost. Clearly Peter was a fanatic upon whatever side he espoused, and all the unmeasured forces of a great nation, a nation whose resources and power Europe could not as yet gauge, hung on the whim of his unbalanced, irresponsible mind. Saintonge was no politician, but if Russia joined hands with their ancient enemy, no political insight was needed to justify Roop's declaration that the power of France, even the honour of France, was in jeopardy. To prevent such a coalition no sacrifice could be too great, no intrigue too contemptible for employment.

But how to proceed ? What was the first step to take now that Choiseul's instructions were void ? There was no thoroughfare by way of Catherine, and as Saintonge remembered Ulrica Khitrovin he felt a rush of satisfaction even in his helplessness. He was free to follow up Dolgoburg and Povolsk unashamed.

A touch on his arm roused him.

" He is coming this way," said Kasbek, " and for her sake hereafter he should not see me with her. But do not leave her alone : a repetition of what passed at supper would be unendurable."

Saintonge nodded without entirely comprehending the Russian's motives. Nor was there time for explanation. Half-way down the length of the room the crowd swayed as Peter came towards them.

But if Saintonge failed fully to grasp Kasbek's reasons for withdrawing, he at least understood that, in a different sense from that in which Vorontsof had used the word, he was to act as a diversion.

" Madame, a barbarian of the south will surely be pardoned if he fall into a breach of your northern etiquette. May I beg the privilege of your company in a tour of the room ? "

" Etiquette ? " exclaimed Catherine, rising. " Here, as you see, we are all good comrades, and where there are no manners—I don't mean you, Monsieur de Saintonge ; like all your nation, you are charming—there can be no offence. Nor, after what has happened to-night, are there many who would call it a privilege. Come, Ulrica, on the other side."

But when Saintonge, with the knowledge that a burned child fears the fire, would have turned down the room so as to avoid the Czar, she went straight forward, meeting Peter face to face. Elizabeth Vorontsof's arm was linked with his, or, rather, his in hers, shoulder to shoulder, and, as before, Von Goltz was in attendance. The Emperor's face was very red, his wig pushed awry,

and he was guffawing loudly as at some rough jest. But as he saw his wife approaching he checked the laugh, and his narrow eyes grew angry.

Though Catherine saw the change, as all saw it, she neither paused nor faltered; only, the finger-tips on Saintonge's arm tightened a little, involuntarily he thought.

"Monsieur, I present to you my friend, Monsieur de Saintonge, lately come from France."

"Hey? France? France was beaten just now as I said she would be. I bid you good night, Monsieur whose name I did not catch."

But Catherine was not so easily to be put aside. The insult at the supper-table compelled courage. She knew that already in Peter's mind the idea was budding to put in her place as Empress the woman whose arm he held. Indecision, uncertainty as to his own strength and Catherine's weakness, alone held him back. To show fear or resentment would but precipitate the crisis, causing the bud to flower and bear fruit in none could tell what violent act against herself.

"Monsieur de Saintonge, Sire. And I do not think you heard me call him my friend? Your friends are mine—Mademoiselle Vorontsof, what a delightful evening you have provided for us!—your friends, I say, are mine; why should not mine be yours? Mademoiselle Vorontsof, I present to you Monsieur de Saintonge."

"Eh? What's that? Friends?" And Peter stood for a moment open-mouthed, considering. The bud was as yet only a bud, and he had cunning enough to know that precipitancy was dangerous. Besides, Elizabeth Vorontsof pressed his arm significantly. Shrewder than Peter, she quite understood the present value and future potentialities of Catherine's tolerance. "You are right, of course you are right. I always called you Madame Resource. So Monsieur de Saintonge is your friend? Elizabeth," and he chuckled as he turned to Mademoi-

selle Vorontsof, " you and I are friends too, are we not ? Monsieur de Saintonge, by what route did you travel from France ? "

" Through Prussia, Sire."

" And were you at Potsdam ? Did you see my good friend, the King, there ? I am his colonel, you know."

" No, Sire : I hastened on. I heard you were organising your regiment of Holsteiners, and desired to see——"

" Ah ha ! So you heard that ? And they talk at Potsdam about my Holsteiners, do they ? I'll show you them some day. Come and see me, Monsieur de Saintonge. Gudovich ! Where is Gudovich ? Oh, you are there ! Gudovich, let Monsieur de Saintonge have the *entrée* at all times : you hear, at all times. Madame Resource, are you satisfied ? Now where is Vorontsof ? Even a soldier must sleep o' nights, if he is to keep awake at his post, and so I must go."

In front of the door at the head of the stairs Catherine held out her hand to Saintonge.

" Then we shall see you ? " she said as he kissed it.

" Madame, I am your servant in all things."

" But I called you friend," she answered, and passed on.

Bending a second time, Saintonge kissed Ulrica Khitrovin's hand as he had kissed that of the Empress, and yet with a difference. Also he held it a trifle longer than he had held Catherine's ; but that, no doubt, was due to a difference in Court etiquette.

" Mademoiselle, is the invitation yours also ? "

" If it is the friend, Monsieur, as soon and as often as you please ; but I do not think I care about the traveller for pleasure," was the reply, and she too passed on.

" Let us go," said Breteuil, as Saintonge stood watching the girl disappear round the broad sweep of the curved stairs, half hoping for a backward glance which never came. And yet, by that divination which is so

strong in women, she knew his gaze followed her and smiled to herself, unconsciously happy that Dolgoburg and Povolsk were not the end. "I have a long night's work before me, and I should lose no time. The Czar has given us something to think about. Choiseul must hear what has happened. And I would like to say this, Monsieur de Saintonge: you have done very well, very well indeed. Choiseul's idea is not so foolish as I had supposed, and if I spoke hastily the other day I again regret it. I have a sleigh waiting; shall I leave you at your lodgings?"

But Saintonge refused the offer.

"Thank you, Baron, I shall walk. This smoke—good heavens! What a country it is, and what a people, barbarians all, or almost all—the smoke has got into my brain, as well as poisoned my lungs, and a walk will freshen me before I sleep. Besides, if you have food for thought, so have I."

CHAPTER XV

A VOICE IN THE NIGHT

IT is the tritest of platitudes that success, like life, is sweet, and that the measure of success is its recognition; nor is it less of a commonplace that to dwell on our successes is pleasant to the natural man. And yet, as Saintonge walked slowly homeward to his lodgings through the still, crisp air, it was not the thought that he had done very well which filled his mind, though, apart from what Breteuil had said, such a thought would have been entirely justified. Where there are two belligerents it is a triumph of diplomacy to be recognised and trusted as a friend by both.

With Catherine the credit was not all his own: Breteuil and Kasbek had laid the foundation and he had builded. With Peter it was different. There, following a rule as simple as the Fool's Mate at chess, he had turned what had seemed a hopeless defeat into victory. The formula is as old as the story of the serpent in Eden. Wrap a pleasant lie in adroit flattery and present gracefully: when swallowed whole the effect is as instantaneous as it is marvellous. "Gudovich, see that Monsieur de Saintonge has the *entrée!*"

Nor were his thoughts filled with the evident difficulties of the situation, dancing, as it were, on the tight-rope with Peter and Catherine on either end of the

balancing pole, and Siberia yawning in the gulf beneath! No; our moods are ourselves, wherein we see our natural face in a glass, and as Paul de Saintonge sauntered on, too wrapped in dreams to walk rapidly, it was the natural Paul de Saintonge, and not the diplomatist or the man of a more than doubtful mission, who was mirrored in his thought. What did the Empress mean when she said, "We?" "Then we shall see you?" were the very words. Who were "We"?

When used by a crowned head the personal pronoun is open to many applications: the personal might, indeed, become impersonal, merging into royal generalities. Was it that? The We which means a dignified nothing? Or was it the woman who spoke, veiling the individual in the plural? That, no doubt, was the most flattering; that was what Breteuil meant by success. And yet, flattering as it was, it did not please Saintonge, and he groped further. Was it an endorsement of Peter's courtesy? We—the Emperor and I. Hardly that. Catherine had little intention of sinking her individuality in Peter's, and still less of sharing her friends with her husband. If these could be eliminated, what then? Who remained? We—Ulrica and I—Ulrica! The wish was more than father to the thought; it was so much the thought itself that the antagonism in the association did not at first strike him. Then, as he repeated the words in his mind Ulrica and I, the incongruity betwixt Ulrica and the purpose which had been so many weeks his mission came suddenly home to him, and burying his chin deeper in his upturned fur collar, he walked yet more slowly onwards. Had not his satisfaction been premature? Breteuil had agreed with Choiseul even after the insult, Breteuil, who knew the local circumstances intimately. It was the tight-rope act over again, only this time Catherine and Ulrica were at the opposite ends of the pole.

The thought vexed him, for with it came a clearer revelation that Ulrica outbalanced everything. Everything? Was that quite true? Laval, for instance? He knew Laval's views. A French girl of good breeding who would bring a fat *dot* in her pocket, and all three points essential, for Laval was as pigheaded as he was autocratic. And two of them failed. Ulrica was Russian and penniless. But next to the mystery of divinity the mystery of love is the most marvellous, and Saintonge had grown in self-dependence. Poverty no longer frightened him as it had in the warmer air of Versailles, and so, without a hesitating thought, Ulrica outbalanced the Golden Shoes.

But there was a greater than Laval, a weightier power in the scale than poverty; a point beyond which no man dares please himself. France was in danger. Peter's outburst at the gaming-table had left no possible doubt of that, and not even Ulrica could outweigh France in danger. Nor would Ulrica wish to so outweigh; of that he was certain. What then? As the memory of Choiseul's sarcasm freshened, Saintonge paused altogether in his loitering walk and set his teeth. The Duke had compared him with Roop—patriots both, selling themselves to the highest bidder! Again, what then? Only, that he must prove that Choiseul was right and yet lied; a patriot, but not like Roop. What were Choiseul's words—"A patriot, sir, is a man who sets the needs of his country first, and counts no loss a cost in her service." That meant he must lose Ulrica, must worse than lose her. For such a part as he must play she could have nothing but abhorrence, loathing, and contempt. And yet, an hour ago, she had looked so kindly upon him! The change would be hard to face—how hard, let lovers judge.

The street in which Saintonge stood lost in thought

was deserted. At first a rare sleigh had passed him, but now even the *crack-crack* of the drivers' whips had died away. The moon was almost vertical, and in the absence of shadows the newly fallen snow, with its unswept parallel ridges at either side the street, lay as if carved from white marble. It was a city of death, with Saintonge its one unhappy ghost to haunt the silences.

But life was not far distant. Down a side street some distance from where he stood came the patter of running feet, and of feet running their fastest, then a scuffle, a hoarse murmur of breathless words, a scream of pain, and voices shouting. For a moment Saintonge hesitated. He was in a strange city, a city of whose laws and customs he knew nothing, a city where violence in high places passed unquestioned. A brawl was the last thing he desired. But as he hesitated there was a cry for help. Even in his ignorance of the language he knew it was a cry for help, and that the need was the urgent need of a life pushed to the verge of death. The sharpness of its appeal told him that much. A roar answered it, a roar through which a note of triumph rang; the scuffle rose afresh, there was a clang, but not of metal on metal, and again a cry, but this time the cry of blended voices.

Loosening the buttons of his heavy fur coat, Saintonge ran forward, round the angle of the street, and yet faster up the cross-road whence the cry had come. One-third along its length stood a church withdrawn beyond the straight line of the adjacent houses, and in the angle so formed was a group of men. All had their backs turned outwards like dogs upon a quarry, and as dogs strain one upon another to reach their prey, so they strained, human bloodhounds that they were. A clenched fist shot up as those behind reached forward, a bludgeon rose and fell, and from the absence of steel Saintonge knew he had to deal with a rabble from the

kennel: such night prowlers as haunt the slums and rookeries of every city. There seemed to be six or eight of them, but they constantly shifted and he made no attempt to count. Though none spoke, their guttural breathing was like the growl of a beast.

But again there was a cry for help, this time incoherent, almost a sob of despair, rage, and pain, and Saintonge, running his swiftest, ran also softly and gave no answer: the odds against him were heavy, and he would throw away none of the advantages of surprise. And yet, at the last moment, he almost resigned the advantage. To strike from behind seemed like murder. But a cudgel poised for a smashing blow decided him. The time for punctilio had passed. Over the rounded shoulders of those nearest him he thrust under the upraised arm, drew back and thrust again, thrust elsewhere, thrust so swiftly that the two screams, almost as much surprise as pain, rose in the one breath. Down dropped the cudgel, round, clawing the air and still screaming, spun the wounded men, each ran a few steps, reeled, staggered another step and fell, the one in the middle of the road, the other at the church door. At the double scream the growl of the beast ceased. Back the five remaining cringed against the wall; then, as the moonlight fell on Saintonge's sword withdrawn to lunge a third time, they broke away and ran, some up and some down the street.

"Are you much hurt?" and Saintonge bent over the man in the angle. He lay on his right side, propped upon his elbow, the left arm still raised to guard his head. His fur cap had fallen in the scuffle, and there was a familiar look in the upturned face. Somewhere—he could not at the moment recall where—Saintonge had seen just such a face full of just such a passion. "Come," he went on, stretching out a hand, "let me help you up, unless there are bones broken. I

don't think these scoundrels are likely to trouble us again."

The answer was in Russian, and for about the fiftieth time within the week Saintonge shook his head.

"I am French, and cannot understand a word of your language."

"French?" The man on the pavement had pushed himself into a sitting posture, and was tenderly feeling his left arm for bruises; but now he paused, looking up sharply. "You are not called Saintonge, by any chance?"

"Why not? The name is a good one."

"Good enough, but—*Dieu de dieux!* here's a coil!" and he burst out laughing. But a wince ended his merriment, and he drew in his breath with a moan. "Deuce take the brutes! A pretty rub-a-dub-dub they have played on my ribs. I'll be black and blue for a month, but no—I don't think there are any bones broken. And I have never thanked you. You have saved my life—there's no doubt of it—and I'm very grateful, for I have as good a use for my life as most men. But to think that it should be you of all men in the world!" and forgetting his flailed ribs he again broke out into laughter.

"I don't see——" began Saintonge stiffly. To be supersensitive to ridicule had always been a weakness with him. But the other, catching him by the arm, cut him short as he scrambled to his feet.

"Of course not, but it's a joke all the same, and a good joke too. My name is Orloff, Monsieur de Saintonge, Alexius Orloff."

"A brother to—to——" As Saintonge hesitated, remembering now where the half recognition had come from, Orloff again cut in.

"Just so: now do you see the point of the joke? There is Gregory swearing to have your

life, and here are you cheerfully risking that same life——"

"Not much risk, I think."

"Oh! by Saint Michael, but there was. I don't lie on my back to be cudgelled for the mere pleasure of the thing. Not much risk? I know better. Up to a point such scum are cowards; beyond that they are devils. It was the surprise saved us both. Here are you, I say, risking that same life to save Gregory's brother, and succeeding to perfection. After that, how can you cut one another's throats, you two, or even try to? It wouldn't be decent. I give you my word, Saintonge, from to-night you are safe from Gregory, no matter what happens."

"Safe, sir? Safe? I am my own safety, thank God."

"Then Gregory is safe from you: have it how you will. But we are a wild crew, we Orloffs, and here in Petersburg you will find yourself none the worse for having us on your side. *Dieu de dieux!* but I'm in a jelly all over. Curse these vile brutes! Lend me your sword a moment. Mine they smashed with a bludgeon, and I flung the hilt at one of them; you might have heard him howl when it caught him in the mouth!"

Limping across the road, Orloff turned the fallen man over with his foot as indifferently as one would turn a crushed rat, and stooped down.

"Dead as Saint Christopher! You can hit hard, Saintonge, and perhaps Gregory is well out of it. But our other friend is not so quiet. He wheezes like a slit bellows." Tucking the sword under his arm, Orloff caught by the feet the fellow who lay propped in the angle of the church door, and, with as little ceremony as compassion, dragged him on the flat of his back forward into the moonlight. His mouth was twisted with pain, his teeth clenched, his face grey against

the trodden snow on which he lay. Again Orloff bent low.

"No, I don't know him—a common night-bird—I might have guessed that from his bludgeon. Your hired assassin goes better armed, and apes the gentleman who pays him his wages. And yet at first I thought it was all a little attention from Munnich on behalf of his friend Peter. Suffering, are you, my poor fellow? Well, so am I, if that is any consolation to you."

Struggling up on one elbow the fellow caught Orloff by the skirt of his heavy coat.

"Mercy, Excellency! Mercy, Highness! Mercy, for the love of God!"

"Speak French," answered Orloff, jeering him, as he shook himself free. "Monsieur de Saintonge cannot understand what you say, and it is Monsieur de Saintonge you have to thank. Mercy? That is to say, 'Cure my suffering.' Well, you will be free from pain presently, I give you my word." And taking the sword from under his arm, he held it point down, now to the throat, now to the breast, as if the artist in him was in two minds.

"My God!" cried Saintonge, aghast at the coming tragedy. "Don't murder the man!"

But Orloff only laughed and brought his grim play to an end, even as the poor wretch fawned upon him, howling. Down twenty inches with the weight of his tall body behind it, flashed the blade, up jerked the flattened knees as the point pricked; there was a convulsion and a scream.

"That is a language we all understand," said Orloff, drawing out the blade and wiping it carefully on the rags of the man's coat. "Murder? Bah, Saintonge, you use too big a word. It's his deserts and best for us all. I have no desire to set Munnich and these others asking what Alexius Orloff was doing after midnight in such and such a place. As for him, I did him a kindness.

Better a clean thrust, which kills at once, than die by joints on the wheel, now a leg, now an arm ; and faith ! I ought to be something of a judge ! To-night the rascals gave me a fair imitation of the performance, and I'm sore in every limb. Now, let us go home, though first I'll find my hilt, lest the police should ask questions and the imitation become reality. In Russia the police ought to be feminine, they are so curious."

He soon found what he sought, and together the two returned to the main street, Orloff cursing, laughing, and groaning by turns over his bruised muscles. There they paused.

"Which way now ? "

"To the left, and then towards Vasili Ostroff," answered Saintonge.

"That is not my way, so we part for to-night." He paused, then, as if acting under a sudden impulse, laid his hands on Saintonge's shoulders. Tall though the Frenchman was, the other held the advantage by three inches. "We are friends, are we not ? Not you and I only, but Gregory and you ? Gregory is not sober-minded as I am, but he means well."

"I desire no quarrel and will seek none," answered Saintonge curtly, "but at Dolgoburg Monsieur Orloff——"

"I know all about Dolgoburg. You were perfectly right. Gregory was a fool and the little wench another. What the deuce harm does a kiss do a woman ? "

"Mademoiselle Khitrovin is my friend," began Saintonge angrily, but Orloff again interrupted him.

"*Dieu de dieux !* Do you say so ? We thought that perhaps you had your ambitions—the Empress—Eh ? You know what I mean ? But that settles it. From this out Gregory shall be your friend, and for your own sake as well as mine ; there are two good reasons growing cold up the street why he should, reasons that speak and hold their tongues at the same

time. Sleep sound to-night, Saintonge, for when I'm cured of my bruises we'll show you Petersburg, Gregory and I; by Saint Michael, but we shall, and then there won't be much sleep for any one of the three, I promise you that!"

CHAPTER XVI

ROOP

BUT late though it was, sleep was still far from Saintonge.

"There is a gentleman waiting to see you upstairs, Monsieur," said the concierge as he shut the door behind his lodger.

"To see me? And at this hour? Who is he?"

"He gave no name, Monsieur."

"What is he like?" asked Saintonge. He had few acquaintances in Petersburg, and his thoughts turned to Gregory Orloff with a grim satisfaction. He would say nothing of what had happened since Vorontsof's supper, and perhaps the botched job of Dolgoburg might be patched up after all. "Is he a tall, burly, big-limbed, clean-shaven man?"

"Not so tall as you are, Monsieur, by three or four inches. For the rest, he was wrapped in a cloak."

"When did he come?"

"About an hour ago. I told him you were at Monsieur Vorontsof's, and might be late, but he said he would wait."

"Very good." And with a nod Saintonge mounted the stairs, but slowly, for he was perplexed as well as annoyed.

Evidently his movements were watched, and that he had supped at Vorontsof's would be no news. An hour ago was after midnight: at such an hour a visit

suggested urgency, or secrecy, or both. The persistency in waiting pointed in the same direction.

"Hang Choiseul!' said Saintonge to himself, his hand upon the door, and as he said it he had an illuminating thought. Perhaps it was a courier from the Duke? Could the news of the death of the Empress, and the succession of Peter, have reached Paris; and was the policy of the French government changed? If so, how was he affected? Was his mission at an end? If so, would Laval cry "Failure"?

At the further side of the table, his feet stretched out to the heat of the stove, his visitor was comfortably seated in a deep arm-chair, the cloak of which the door-keeper had spoken still across his shoulders; but at the click of the latch he rose.

"Ah ha! Monsieur Peter Paul Roop!" said Saintonge, closing the door, and standing with his back to it. "Why is my valet, your namesake, not here to keep you company?"

"I sent my cousin to bed," answered Roop quietly, and in a most matter-of-fact voice. "There was no need for him to be present."

"Oh? Your cousin, and my servant? That is awkward."

"I think not; we all serve, each in our degree. He does his duty, I shall do mine, and you—you will do yours. That you know me will save time and troublesome explanations."

"Oh, yes, I know you," answered Saintonge. "Monsieur de Choiseul told me much, Dolgoburg more, and Breteuil the rest. I think I can truly say that I know you very well indeed."

"Then you need no identification. You have a letter for me?"

Saintonge's tone had been studiously offensive, but Roop showed no exasperation. His attitude was that of a man whose mind was too closely concentrated

upon issues of grave importance to heed the pin-pricks of a cheap sarcasm. As a result, it was Saintonge who was irritated, and with a gesture of angry impatience he turned to a side door which communicated with his bedroom.

Unlocking a portmanteau, he found the Duke's letter after a moment's search.

"From Monsieur de Choiseul," he said, throwing it down on the table.

Holding it near the lamp, Roop examined it carefully both front and back. It was a thick, square envelope of stout paper, sealed with a broad splash of yellow wax bearing the Duke's cypher, and addressed simply to Monsieur Roop. In one corner were scrawled Monsieur de Choiseul's initials.

"It has been opened," said Roop quietly.

"Opened?" echoed Saintonge, by no means quietly. "You are impertinent! Do you dare to suggest——"

"Oh, not by you. What? Did you not know that within twenty-four hours of your arrival in St. Petersburg everything you possessed was ransacked? Every paper, every letter read and copied by the police? Really, you are very innocent. We who conspire——"

"Conspire?"

"What else? We will get on faster if we avoid pretences and call things by their right names. I say that we who conspire should be more careful, if only for our colleagues' sake."

"Colleagues!" cried Saintonge, still more angrily, "colleagues, Monsieur Roop?"

"I said colleagues. Those who band themselves together for a common object are colleagues, are they not? This letter should never have left your person by day nor your pillow by night, never, never. Do you know its contents? No? Then how can you tell that disclosure does not spell failure to you and death

to me? And yet you leave it where the first spy can lay his hand upon it! With your permission I shall open it."

Putting his thumb into a corner Roop ripped the envelope across, and taking out the two sheets of paper it contained unfolded them. They were blank. Without a word he handed them to Saintonge.

"The police!" said Saintonge, crestfallen.

"The police are not so childishly direct in their methods as that," answered Roop. "To steal the letter would be a warning to us both, and clumsy. How would it be evidence against us? If confronted with such a letter we would at once cry, 'Forgery!' Nor would they admit they had made a secret perquisition. No, no! The police are not fools. Besides, the paper is the same as that of the envelope, and both are the Duke's. I know them well. No! The truth is Monsieur de Choiseul has assessed your discretion at its exact valuation. But I have letters from him, sent direct to myself, and this is enclosed for you."

Taking some papers from an inner pocket Roop selected an envelope similar in appearance to that lying on the table and handed it to Saintonge. It was addressed, "Monsieur Paul de Saintonge, by favour of Monsieur Peter Paul Roop." The back was sealed with the Duke's cypher, and, as in the case of Roop's envelope, his initials were upon the face in a corner. But for the change in superscription the two were identical.

In silence Saintonge tore it open, and if brevity be truly the soul of wit then Monseigneur was keenly humorous. There were but seven words and a signature: "*Monsieur Roop will give you your instructions. Choiseul.*" No date followed.

Roop drew a chair closer to the stove.

"As we have much to discuss, I shall sit down. Had it been possible I would have seen you before you went to Vorontsof's to-night, but it was out of my power."

"You know the contents of this?" and Saintonge shook the paper he still held with both hands. So preoccupied was he that it was doubtful if he caught the sense of Roop's words.

"Yes: though to me it was phrased differently. '*Monsieur de Saintonge,*' wrote the Duke, '*will obey your instructions.*' You will note that when he is emphatic, Monsieur de Choiseul says little."

"Obey? Obey is not a pleasant word from you to me."

Roop shrugged his shoulders with a little gesture of depreciation.

"A moment ago I said, 'We all serve.' Now I say, 'We all obey'—or suffer for our disobedience! Pleasant? Remember the word is Monsieur de Choiseul's, not mine. Besides, we are practical men and not children. Let us deal with facts—facts which are coercive whether pleasant or not."

"Monsieur Roop, your tone is not the tone of Dolgoburg."

"Monsieur de Saintonge, the circumstances are different: I suit my tone to my circumstances."

With Choiseul's letter still in his hand Saintonge turned away and paced slowly up and down the room, his chin sunk forwards. He was trying his hardest to think out the situation before committing himself, but the words ding-donged in his head. Monsieur Roop will give you your instructions: Monsieur de Saintonge will obey Monsieur Roop. The one was the complement of the other. Roop will instruct, Saintonge will obey—instruct—obey: instruct—obey. And there was no date. Had the omission a meaning—a menace? Was it a warning that so long as he was in St. Petersburg, so long as he was in Russia, Roop should command and he obey, or, as Roop put it, suffer for his disobedience?

Pausing, Saintonge looked across at Roop, and their

glances met. But there was nothing of triumph in Roop's eyes, nothing of malice, only a deep gravity. Their sharp conflict of wits and temper seemed already forgotten.

"What are your coercive facts?"

"That we conspire, that we are colleagues, and that the hand, or, if necessary, the heart, must obey the head. And when I say head I do not mean chief: I mean the brain that thinks and foresees. If you admit the first, the other two are obvious deductions."

Roop paused, but Saintonge, leaning across the table, remained silent. He had no denial ready, nor was denial possible, but he was not prepared to commit himself by assent. Conspiracy is a dangerous word the world over, but dangerous above all in Russia.

"Admit the truth frankly, Monsieur de Saintonge," went on the Russian. "Admit it once and for all that we stand on common ground. Or must I prove that what I say is true? Shall I define conspiracy for you? It is the concurrence in action of two or more persons to bring about a given result. Do you agree?"

"But the object is an innocent one."

"That does not alter the definition."

"Perhaps not, but it takes the sting from the word and the danger."

"Then learn that in Russia there is no such thing as innocency in a conspiracy. And conspiracies have this quality, Monsieur de Saintonge; a quality in common with all things which have a vital power in them; they often force the hands of those who conspire. Out of the harmless egg comes the hawk or the vulture, red in beak and claw. That may well be the case now, and where then will be your innocency? But I see you grant me my first fact?"

"I desire to see Russia the friend of France."

"Whereas she is now the covert enemy and any day may be the overt? I also desire it, and you and I

and others—never mind their names—are in concurrence to effect the change. Therefore we conspire and are colleagues. We have a common object, though our methods may differ. But there must be a head, and Monsieur de Choiseul has settled our relative positions, so my three facts are proven. Do you agree ? "

" You may juggle words as you like," answered Saintonge doggedly, " but I am here for one object only, and I shall join in nothing else."

" Who asks you to ? Only the method of success may not be exactly what you suppose, and the third fact is obedience. Read the Duke's letter once again."

" Method of success ? I don't understand you."

Roop sat silent. The gravity in his face had deepened to gloom and his brows were knit, like those of a man immersed in thought. Once or twice he glanced up at Saintonge, his mouth half opened, as if about to speak, then he turned away again and pondered yet more deeply. The methods which might ultimately be necessary were such as few men care to set out, frank and naked, even in the secret chambers of their own minds : still less easy was it to describe them in direct words. In the heat of passion, plain murder becomes at times, or for the time, a natural, an inevitable, almost a logical and necessary act, and a red tragedy may tower into a righteous judgment. But that which the stress of the moment, the enthusiasm of devotion, or the goad of circumstance justifies, is without defence, no matter by what sophistry, in the unthreatened, quiet retirement of the peace of a warm-lit room. He must wait and let the day of action, if that day came, bring its own justification with it.

" Methods ? " he said at last. " Well, for instance, what, in six words, were Choiseul's instructions when you quitted Paris ? "

" To gain over the Emperor."

" Well, that is changed. The information on which

the Duke's instructions were founded is now two months old. Then the instructions were wise. Now we know that to gain over the Emperor is impossible. Already he is pledged to Prussia, pledged to the neck. For the future show the Emperor nothing more than sufficient courtesy to keep you above suspicion. Next, and again in few words, how were you to gain the Emperor ? "

" Through the Empress. But——"

" Hold a moment. These instructions are unchanged. Gain the Empress, Monsieur de Saintonge, your methods are your own."

" The Empress ! It is easy to see you were not at Vorontsof's banquet. The Empress ? " repeated Saintonge scoffingly. It was a solace to find Roop at fault. " She has no more influence with Peter than I have : less, I think, for I am so much his friend that I am to go with him to see his Holsteiners drill, while to-night he drove her to tears before the whole Court."

" And the tears of queens, Monsieur de Saintonge, are dragon's teeth—they breed armed men. Catherine is more than a great queen ; she is a great woman and rules through the heart as well as by the head."

" Rules ? To-night she stood alone but for Kasbek and—Mademoiselle Khitrovin. One man and one woman out of hundreds ! Even Orloff held aloof ; Orloff ! whose blood was so hot at Dolgoburg ! But then he had you with him : two against one."

" The situation is difficult," answered Roop, leaving the sneer unheeded. " I admit it is even critical to the verge of disaster. The Emperor, if he had his way, would divorce her to-morrow—or worse. The shadow of the Imperial throne is as cold as death. But, being a woman, she is weak and not to be feared, therefore Munnich and others hold him back from extreme measures ; the most unforgivable of political blunders is to shed blood needlessly. Not that they love her, or

care a copeck for her life, but their pride could not endure the woman Peter has in his mind as her successor. I suppose you know that the hour Catherine dies he will marry the Vorontsof woman—if he dares. That she may still seem weak she weeps, and has few friends —in public. But you saw to-night what kind of a man Peter is. When he is half sober or frightened he fawns upon her, and she is Madame Resource, when he is drunk he degrades her—and he is mostly drunk. Any day the bully in him may get the upper hand of the coward for a brutal ten minutes. What will happen then? Remember, he is irresponsible in power as well as in brain. A half-witted, drink-sodden autocrat, Monsieur de Saintonge, is capable of any wild crime. To prevent that crime, even to put back the hands of the clock, it may be necessary to divert the current of his thoughts at any cost, and—that brings me back to Kasbek. Do not make a friend of Kasbek, Monsieur Saintonge."

Roop's deep earnestness and evident conviction had impressed Saintonge in spite of the contempt he felt for the Russian's position as the paid spy of France: but now the sudden transition and seeming irrelevance startled him.

"Why the deuce not? I like Kasbek."

"Why? Because you are seven-and-twenty, and at that age life is still worth living. If you want another answer, here is one; only a weak man allows his likes or dislikes to influence his reason. In so far as a tool does its work it is good, but no further. Are you a weak man, Monsieur de Saintonge?"

"But Breteuil introduced him to me," answered Saintonge, ignoring the question. After all, it was rather a hint than a question demanding a reply. Nor was Saintonge's persistence due simply to perversity. As he said, he liked Kasbek, and though they had met but once he was already prepared to call him friend.

"Granted: and God forbid that I should even seem to hint disparagement of the most single-hearted, the most honourable and chivalrous gentleman in St. Petersburg. Had we a hundred like him I would say, 'Go back to Paris, Monsieur de Saintonge, Russia has no need of you.'"

"All the more cause why I should call him friend. Have you no reason to give me to the contrary? I am not a child to be turned face to the wall in the dark."

Roop paused before answering. Again there came the doubt how far it was safe to be frank with this Frenchman thrust upon him from Paris, and who so little understood both his own danger and the magnitude of the issues at stake—issues much graver to Russia than the friendship of nation for nation. This time he reversed his decision, or reversed it in part.

"I always trust where it is possible," he replied, his gaze resting steadily on Saintonge. "Monsieur de Choiseul has chosen you out of all Versailles, and Monsieur de Choiseul must know his man. You ask a reason why Kasbek's friendship is dangerous? Have you ever read the history of old Rome?"

"Of Rome? Yes—at least some of it."

"Then you remember there was once a Metius Curtius."

"The fool who leaped into a hole in the ground? Yes, but that is legend, not history."

"While this will be history, not legend. And was he a fool? He lost himself but he saved Rome."

"Well, then, call him a noble fool. What next?"

"Only this: would it have been wise of one who was not a noble fool to cling to the fool's skirts?"

"And perish with him? No, one fool was enough; the sacrifice would have been useless."

"Then, Monsieur de Saintonge, I say again, make no friend of Kasbek. Further than that I cannot go to-night. Or—yes, I will go one step further, for it is a lesson you must lay to heart. Always remember this,

conspirators have no friends. Monsieur de Choiseul wrote me that you were not in love. I know what he meant by the information, I know it had special reference to the purpose for which he sent you to Petersburg; but, Monsieur de Saintonge, the truth has a deeper, a far deeper, significance than that. The conspirator must never love—never, never."

He paused, and this time it was Saintonge who remained in doubt. He had been thrown off his balance, and was like a man struggling to regain his mental level. At the Vorontsofs he had begun by despising Kasbek as such another as Roop. Later he had acquitted him of all mercenary baseness, and now piecing together what Roop had so broadly hinted, he gathered that Kasbek had lent himself to some desperate venture out of which he could not hope to bring even life itself. If he had so misread Kasbek—the noble fool dying to save a nation—was it not possible that he had misread Roop also? Kasbek, the Metius Curtius, the noble fool who was yet no fool, had called Roop a very honest man. But then, did Kasbek know the whole truth, that Roop was in the pay of France? And what was the whole truth? It was a question Saintonge had good cause to ask, but every hour convinced him more and more that the answer was as yet far off.

"Are these all your instructions?"

"All for the present as regards Kasbek. After Kasbek comes Orloff; you made a mistake last week at Dolgoburg, Monsieur de Saintonge."

"I think not," answered Saintonge curtly. "I think the mistake was Monsieur Orloff's."

"That there were two mistakes does not mend yours. But we will not argue the point, for there is nothing debatable in it. You do not seem to understand that a man on such business as yours has no right to step aside for his own pleasure. That is where your nation differs from mine."

"Monsieur Orloff stepped aside."

"Orloff risked his life. That was his mistake, for just now his life is not his own. But you endangered your commission. To have killed Orloff would have ruined you."

"And yet Monsieur de Breteuil thinks that because of what happened at Dolgoburg I may gain the—what shall I say? the goodwill of the Empress?"

"Arousing jealousy? Eh? No!" and Roop shook his head. "Monsieur de Breteuil is an observer from the outside only, and it is wrong. Jealousy is petty, and the Empress has no small vices. Put that idea out of your head. What troubles me is that because of Dolgoburg Orloff may force a quarrel on you. No! say nothing," he went on as Saintonge raised his head to speak. "I know you are not a coward, I know you are not afraid of Orloff. But to quarrel with him would ruin you with the Empress."

"Tell me," said Saintonge, speaking suddenly and without premeditation. "What does it matter to you either way? Do you not draw your pay all the same?"

"Pay?" cried Roop sharply, "Pay? Choiseul told you that?"

"Yes." And Saintonge would have been more than human if, after the schooling of the last half-hour, he had found no satisfaction in the pallor of dismayed anger which followed the question. A Laval of Saintonge, he had been chided like a graceless urchin by the cousin of his own valet! The offence was intolerable. "He said you were a Russian patriot in the pay of France."

Drawing a long breath, Roop sat silent; but as Saintonge watched him across the table he saw the blood mount slowly to his face. For a moment he shivered as if a cold blast had struck him; then the emotion passed, and when he spoke his voice was as calm and level as before.

"It is true," he said; "and understand, Monsieur, I neither excuse nor defend myself. Nor do I explain. When I sell my country it will be time enough to say that France has bought me. If Russia has need even of my honour it must have it. Can you say the same of France? You ask what does your success matter to me? It matters this: if the Empress befriends France now, France will befriend the Empress in her need. Monsieur de Saintonge, to me the Empress is Russia. Now as to Orloff. Here are your instructions. There must be no quarrel. He has four brothers, officers in regiments here in St. Petersburg, and one of them——"

"Alexius?" asked Saintonge. Roop's cold reply had sobered him, and already he was ashamed of his sneer.

"Eh? Yes, Alexius."

"Then there is nothing more to be said. There need be no quarrel."

"Oh, but you do not know Gregory Orloff."

"No! But I know Alexius, and there is no more to be said." It was a very dignified attitude, but Saintonge had been so long under the harrow that he might be permitted the small triumph of his reticence. "And that being so, we may say good night, Monsieur Roop."

Roop rose at once.

"Be it so. But that you do not choose to be frank is as dangerous to yourself as to me. I have only one thing to add, Monsieur de Saintonge; do not say, 'Because I am only one, and unknown, I can do nothing.' Events are like streams—at their source they may be lightly turned aside. To-night you heard the Czar say he would follow the King of Prussia to hell itself. What if these two unite to make France a hell, and yours the hand which with the help of the Empress might have turned them aside? I bid you good night, Monsieur de Saintonge."

As there had been no hand-clasp at their meeting, so

also was there none at their farewell. With a curt nod Roop closed the door behind him, leaving Saintonge standing in the shadow of the dying lamp. The coils he had thought loosened for ever were bound round him again, and tighter than before. Roop was to instruct, and he to obey, and Roop's instructions were clear. But, clearer even than these, a sentence of warning was written upon the walls of his mind: "The conspirator must never love—never, never." And yet the Empress had said, "We shall see you?" and Ulrica Khitrovin's eyes had looked a welcome.

CHAPTER XVII

THERE IS NO ROOM FOR THE EMPRESS

"ULRICA, will you lay me a wager?"

"But, Madame, how can I, when I have no money?"

"You have what some day will be thought worth more than all the gold in Russia."

"I, Madame?" and the colour which rose to Ulrica Khitrovin's cheeks hinted that she was not quite as ignorant of the Empress's meaning as the surprise in her tone suggested.

"Yes! You have yourself. And don't you know that in Petersburg we play for lives and souls whether we have money or not?"

"But, Madame, you have won me already."

"I believe I have, child," answered Catherine, the banter of her harsh voice softening into tenderness; "and I am like you, I must either win, or—lose myself. But this time you are right to be cautious, for my wager is a certainty; it is that Monsieur de Saintonge will visit us to-day. What do you think?"

"I think, Madame, that Monsieur de Saintonge will be the same as other men when a queen beckons."

"Oh! Then to you Monsieur de Saintonge seems just the same as other men? As Monsieur Kasbek? As Monsieur Orloff? As any one of the hundred and fifty who were at the supper last night? Now to me he seemed different, and I was interested. At Dolgoburg was he the same as other men?"

"But, Madame," she protested, evading a direct answer by the protest, "I know so little of him."

"Know so little! Why, girl, the more you know of men the less difference you find in them! But I, who know even less of Monsieur de Saintonge than you, have yet seen enough to want him for a friend. Ulrica, child, will you help me to win him? You know I have so few friends."

"But those you have love you, Madame."

"And that would be very wrong in Monsieur Saintonge?"

"Why should I say so? And only last night he told you of his devotion."

"Yes," answered Catherine drily. "He told me with his tongue, while his eyes looked straight over my head and said more than his tongue, but not to me! Fie, girl! You must learn not to go red like that! Don't you know that a face of flint, a front of brass, and a heart of stone are the first necessities for life at Court? Child, child, you have much to learn, and Monsieur de Saintonge and I will teach you between us."

"You have already taught me to love you, Madame."

"And he? What did he teach you at Dolgoburg? You won't answer? Then it was some naughtiness, I am afraid, something you would not wish me to hear, something you are ashamed——"

"No, Madame, no, no; nothing I need be ashamed of, or Monsieur de Saintonge either; only I—I——" and she ended in a stammer, her eyes troubled and the colour still high in her cheeks.

"It is a secret between you two? Don't you know that when a woman has a secret she must think about it? Then she must think about the one who shares it with her, and if that one is a man—— There you are! Red to the ears again! Ulrica, child, some secrets are only learned once in a lifetime, and beware who it is

that teaches you, for they can never be unlearned. Who is in the ante-room ? "

" Monsieur Orloff, Madame."

" Then while you tell me all about Dolgoburg he can receive Monsieur de Saintonge when he comes, for come he will if I know anything of men."

" No, Madame, no, no ! "

This time it was a cry, not a protest. At its sharpness the smiling malice faded from Catherine's mouth, and the full lips hardened. What she had said in half-bitter banter was an ever-present truth—she had few friends, and her need of them was great. Ulrica Khitrovin's quickly-won devotion had moved her deeply, but to meet the crisis which threatened she had need of men rather than women, and Saintonge might be too useful to be lost from her service for any girl's squeamish sentiment or prudery, qualities for which Catherine had little toleration.

" No ? Why will Monsieur de Saintonge not come ? "

" I did not mean that, Madame."

" Then, *Nom de Dieu*, girl, what did you mean ? What are you hiding from me ? "

" Nothing, Madame, nothing," which was hardly the truth, since she was absolutely determined not to disclose the quarrel at the guest-house. " I only mean that—that—Monsieur Orloff should not receive him."

" And why not ? Be plain, if you please, Mademoiselle Khitrovin. I do not like so many mysteries." Catherine had been occupied arranging papers on her writing-table, but now, pushing them aside with an angry rustle, she turned sharply. The hardness of the mouth had crept into the eyes, darkening their violet-brown to black, and with the change her face aged to that stern coldness which later grew to be its almost settled expression. " You know I am not strait-laced, and so long as you and this Monsieur de Saintonge are

content to philander together, without interfering with my arrangements——"

"But, Madame, there was nothing of that kind, nothing at all."

"Then why do you go red and white when I speak of him, and why should he look at you as he does? Bah! I am a woman, and I know the meaning of such looks in a man's eyes. They have a tongue of their own. Philander as you please, but I'll have no quarrelling among my friends. Is that what you are afraid of? That Orloff and he may quarrel?"

"Yes, Madame." Ulrica's voice was very small as she answered. Partly she was ashamed, partly frightened, and partly awed by Catherine's sudden stormy shift of mood.

"Then call Monsieur Orloff, and do thou wait in the ante-room."

"But, Madame, Monsieur de Saintonge——"

"Monsieur de Saintonge! Monsieur de Saintonge!" echoed Catherine, mocking the dismay in the girl's voice. "*Nom de Dieu!* but you are hard to please! Would you have me wait for the man myself, and meet him with my finger in my mouth, as I suppose you would do? Send Orloff as thou art bid, and remember I'll have no quarrelling."

With a curtsey Ulrica left the room, and a brief delay followed before Orloff entered. He was still piqued by his reception at the inn, and loath to lose any opportunity to reverse his ill success. Nor did he advance further than the door, but stood with his back to it, his hand upon the latch, as if impatient to return. So far Ulrica had avoided him; now they would have the ante-room to themselves. His attitude was that of the familiar friend and comrade, in whom the rigid formalities of court etiquette were excused. But his handsome face was peevish and clouded with vexation, nor did he ask Catherine why she had sent for him.

She went straight to the point, and the form in which she put her question justified his assumption of equality.

"Gregory, what occurred at Dolgoburg?"

"Dolgoburg?" he said vacantly, repeating the word with an air of inquiry so studiously blank as to be impertinent. "Dolgoburg? Why! What could occur at Dolgoburg?"

"Come, come; do not sham stupidity. You have a good memory, and you understand me well enough I am sure. Why did you and that Frenchman who was at Vorontsof's supper last night quarrel at Dolgoburg?"

"That? Oh! That was nothing," and he laughed with a relief that was entirely genuine. The first question was open to a wide range of inferences, and had disturbed him a little. Not that he was afraid of Catherine's jealousy, but it was in her power to thwart him, and thwart him she most certainly would if she guessed the whole truth. But it was plain that so far the girl had kept her own counsel, and with one so practised in the art as Orloff to lie was easy. "That was nothing at all. We are much of an age, Saintonge and I, and have tastes in common. But when men have tastes in common they differ on details, and we both insisted we were right. I believe we did lose our tempers for a minute."

"And who carried his point?"

"I, as I always do," answered Orloff, "and as I always will, whether for myself or my friends, no matter what the cost," he added significantly. "Have you ever known me fail when once my heart was set upon success?"

"But you quarrelled?" Catherine avoided the question, which, indeed, was thrown out as much as a boast, or to turn her thoughts in a new direction, as to draw forth an answer.

"Yes, but I tell you I carried my point," he replied impatiently. He was most anxious to shorten the

interview, and not simply to avoid further inconvenient questions. Ulrica Khitrovin was in the ante-room, and this was his first opportunity of seeing her alone. "Besides, I have passed my word to Alexius that I will not quarrel again with Saintonge."

"Alexius? Why should Alexius care if you quarrel—it's nothing new—and what has he to do with Monsieur de Saintonge?"

"Oh! What does that matter?" answered Orloff roughly, rattling the latch as he spoke. "Let it keep; it's a long story, and Saintonge may come at any moment."

"Let him come. Mademoiselle Khitrovin will be there to make him welcome, and they are old friends. They met at Dolgoburg, you know."

"Confound him, yes."

There was a moment's silence. Orloff's eyes were defiant, his broad, handsome face flushed with angry vexation; but as he turned to leave the room Catherine checked him.

"I will not permit it, Gregory; understand at once that I will not permit it."

"Permit what?" he said sullenly, but his hand ceased playing with the latch.

"You know well enough. Oh! I'm not jealous—don't imagine that for a moment—but I will not have Ulrica's head turned. She is only a child."

"My faith! But she is more than that; she is a woman, and a pretty woman too!"

Considering to whom he spoke, the words were recklessly impudent, but Catherine was not ruffled. She loved a man's temperament to be robust, even as she loved strength of muscle and girth of limb. This very quality of reckless disregard of consequence was the charm which, more than the beauty of his face, attracted her to Orloff and held him secure in her affections. Not only did it appeal to the passionate feminine side

of her complex nature, but her virile ambition seized upon the characteristic as the very weapon most urgently needed by her weakness. Because of this she showed no resentment at the petulant retort ; Catherine's heart was always servant to her head.

" My hope is that Monsieur de Saintonge will agree with you. Oh ! you men ! you men ! Except Kasbek, and perhaps Roop, I do not believe there is one of you but thinks of himself first."

" We take our risks," answered Orloff. His voice was still sullen, but he knew Catherine too well to push recalcitrance to outrage.

" Your risks ? " she retorted. " And what risks do I not take ? Have you forgotten last night ? My danger is greater than yours, and cannot you see that but for me you would not be safe for an hour ? Peter is such a coward that so long as I live, and am Empress, he dare not strike at you lest I should strike back ; and when I do strike I must strike hard. What use we can make of this Frenchman I do not know, but Breteuil had some set purpose in his mind when he pressed him forward at Vorontsof's. And you talk of risks ! What is Kasbek's risk ? "

The pause was rhetorical rather than to compel an answer, and as such Orloff understood it.

" Some men are of more value dead than living," he answered sarcastically ; but as the colour rose to Catherine's face protest displaced the sneer in his voice as he went on. " Why do you taunt me with Kasbek ? I admit we differ, but is my devotion any less than his ? To him you are no more than a theory of natural development, a machine to grind out progress and better laws, while to me—ah ! Madame—Catherine—well, I will not say it. You know already ; how often have I not told you ! But if we differ we each do our part. And who would be deceived even for an hour if I played his comedy ? "

"Comedy?" echoed Catherine. "Do you call it comedy? Bitter and bloody tragedy, rather."

"You know what I mean; we won't quarrel about words. But if I played his part who would be fool enough to believe me? I have been too—too——" As he broke off, searching for a word, not too grossly offensive, a triumphant light rose to his eyes which he made no attempt to hide. Every way he was necessary to the Empress, and it lay with himself to make the most of the necessity. "Too honoured, too happy," he went on. "It would be incredible that I should plot against so good a mistress." With one hand on the corner of the writing-table, and the other resting on the back of her chair, he leaned over Catherine. "And, my queen, would you have me play Kasbek's part, to its necessary end, rather than my own; would that please you better?"

Catherine made no reply, nor even raised her eyes to his, but sat staring into vacancy, her brows knit and care heavy upon her face.

"Must Kasbek die?" she said at last. "Gregory, is there no other way?"

"After last night, none that I can see. Last night you made a mistake, you who do not often play a false move."

"How?"

"There should have been no tears."

"Could I keep them back? Would not any woman so insulted lose her self-control? In my place would not any woman have wept?"

"You are not any woman," answered Orloff drily. "There is but one Catherine of Russia in the world. I say again, it was a mistake. Better than anyone else you know the nobility of soul of the Emperor's Most Gracious Majesty! How he tramples on the weak and cringes to the strong. Soul! I think when the devil comes to crack that shrivelled nut, his carcase, he'll

find a maggot where the soul should be. You should have called your women round you and broken up the supper-party in such a burst of righteous anger that within the hour he would have been howling for pardon outside your door."

"But after all," and as she spoke her voice was gentler, "I am a woman and neither a theory nor a machine. Would you have me less a woman, Gregory?"

But now it did not suit Orloff to follow the lead of her softer mood. Behind her risk was his own danger, and he must protect himself.

"No, Madame, for it is the woman we love. But last night it should have been Catherine of Russia who is more than a woman, for she has a man's courage and resource. For now your tears have encouraged his cowardice, and to such a man as the Emperor from forcing tears to letting blood is but a step. You stand doubly in his way; he is afraid of you and—I must be candid—he wants to marry the Vorontsof woman; in Russia kings may marry subjects."

"Yes," said Catherine, lifting her stern eyes to meet Orloff's bent over her, and her voice again deepening, "and so may queens."

"And so may queens!" repeated Orloff. There was no doubt but that his vanity applied the inference. This time the triumph was not only in his eyes but in his voice, and his breath quickened at the possibility so bluntly opened up to his ambition. With whatever purpose Catherine let fall the words, they were destined to bear fatal fruit later on. "But the first necessity is your safety, and to-day Peter is dangerous; not even the Czar is afraid of a woman in tears! And so, Madame, Kasbek must act. To draw the insane malice of the Emperor off from you is the only hope."

"I see that," answered Catherine, her brows still knit. Even when she had paraphrased Orloff's words

she had never relaxed. "Yes, I see that. But must the end be—the end?"

Orloff laughed, but in satirical bitterness rather than in merriment. For one who knew Russia as the Empress did, the question was surely a superfluous one.

"He has his choice, but is not the end the same every way? He can either die fighting, with his sword in his hand like a gentleman, or be caught and hung like a dog; unless the clemency of the Czar sends him to the rats of Schlusselburg! I know which I should choose."

"Yes," said Catherine again. She spoke slowly, her face full of concern. "Yes, every way there is but one end; I see that."

She was genuinely grieved, but not even Orloff, who understood her complex nature as scarcely another of her closest intimates understood it, could have told whether her emotion was grief at the prospect of Kasbek's death, or selfish regret that thereby her cause lost a faithful servant and friend. As a politician she was ruthless, and few—if any—could say where in Catherine the woman ended and the politician began.

A short silence followed, through which she sat deep in thought, tapping her finger-tips on the flat of the table; then she roused herself, and when she spoke she spoke briskly. The milk must be spilt, and there was no use crying over it.

"It will be best that I should know no details of time or place. Kasbek can be trusted to be thorough, that is enough for me. Now tell me what happened at Dolgoburg?"

But Orloff was spared the necessity of coining a lie sufficiently near the truth to pass current as honest fact. From the ante-room came the sound of a shrill, penetrating voice, and with a cry of "The Czar!" Orloff stepped back two or three paces. Whipping out his handkerchief, he fell to polishing the hilt of

his sword with all the carelessness of a barrack-room. He knew that the apparent want of courtesy to the Empress would be very far from displeasing Peter. For two or three minutes the sharp voice rose and fell, there was a loud throaty laugh, the murmur of a deeper voice, and silence.

"Now he comes, Madam," said Orloff, and the latch moved.

Opening the door gently the Emperor tiptoed forward, then paused, peering round the room in the curious bird-like fashion which had so struck Saintonge the previous night. His upper teeth were biting his lip nervously, twisting his mouth to one side, and there was a grin of expectancy, half foolish, half cunning, on his face. He had the air of a mischievous, prying schoolboy bent on playing any scurvy, injurious trick which might suggest itself to the malice of his uncurbed ill-manners. At his entrance Catherine rose, curtseying profoundly, and Orloff stood at military attention; he knew it was the deference the Czar would exact, not so much to himself, as to the Prussian uniform which he again wore.

"Make haste!" he said sharply, nodding his head towards Catherine as he spoke, while his fingers patted and fumbled nervously at his tunic. "I am going for a drive, and you must come with me."

"Give me ten minutes, Sire, that I may put on my furs."

"No, no," he snapped. "I have no time to wait, not a minute. The Czar is always busy. He is no idler, no time-waster like—like—other people. We must go now—now, just as you are."

"But it is freezing cold."

"Half Petersburg is freezing cold, poor devils that they are! That's not right, not right at all. We should show our people that what they endure we can endure also."

"Yes," replied Catherine, "if it would serve any purpose."

"And so it does: it serves my purpose, a great purpose. Is that not enough? Come! We must not keep the Czar waiting!"

"The Czar, Sire?"

"To be sure, the Czar! What else would you call him? I mean His Imperial Majesty, Ivan the Sixth! at present residing in his palace of Saint Peter and Saint Paul." And Peter burst into a boisterous fit of laughter. "Even you must know well enough that he is the true heir to the throne, although we do keep him in prison. I am going to pay him my respects, and you are coming with me. But if he is Emperor *de jure*, I am Emperor *de facto!* Must I repeat my orders? Remember the Imperial Family last night at Vorontsof's. I am Emperor. Do you understand what I mean when I say My orders? Come, come now; come just as you are."

"But, Sire, it would kill me."

Peter had already turned towards the open door as if there was nothing more to be said, but now he paused and looked back, a grin of supreme cunning on his face.

"Kill you? Do you really think so? Bah! Death is a little thing; soldiers such as I am have to face it every day. Our people should see we are not afraid. Let us say no more, but go."

Though the Emperor's suite had been grouped out of sight in the ante-room, there had been dead silence during the colloquy between Peter and Catherine, and not a word of all that passed had been lost. That was Peter's intention, since his purpose was still further to humiliate the Empress, thus following up the victory won at Vorontsof's banquet the night before. That his request was preposterous mattered nothing. His logic was simple: Catherine had wept, therefore she

was weak, and being weak, he would compel her even to the preposterous—he was the Czar. But now Gudovich came forward, his military cap held stiffly in one hand, the other at the salute.

"Your pardon, your Majesty, I am sorry to disappoint the Empress, but you have already allotted the only vacant place in the sleighs to Monsieur de Saintonge."

"Hey? Say that again."

"Your Majesty knows there are only two sleighs. To the vacant place in the first you have just now invited Monsieur de Saintonge. In the second are Monsieur Von Goltz, Monsieur Von Korff, and Monsieur Kasbek. That fills both completely."

"Von Goltz I must have with me; Von Korff is chief of police, and I need him where I am going—let Monsieur Kasbek make room."

"But, your Majesty," remonstrated Kasbek, pressing forward into view, "this is an old pledge. Ten days ago you promised that when you visited His Majesty the Czar——"

"His Majesty the Czar! Monsieur Kasbek, the Czar, do you say? Take care, Monsieur, take care. I have hanged men for less."

"I only quote your Majesty's own words," answered Kasbek. Of the entire group he was the most unmoved at Peter's sudden burst of passion. Yet he knew it was true; men had been hanged for less, though it was also true that Peter had afterwards repented.

"And who are you to quote my words? What I say, Monsieur Kasbek, is not for everyone to say."

"I was pleading your promise, your Majesty. Surely the promise of an Emperor of Russia is eternally sacred."

"That is true," said Peter, his unstable mood changing with the new suggestion, and with the change his anger sank as quickly as it had risen. "If I promised, that

ends it. The Emperor is God on earth, and cannot lie. Well, then, we must think of some other way."

"There is my place——" began Gudovich, and at the suggestion Kasbek's face changed as it had never changed before Peter's irresponsible rage. He who was unafraid for himself could be terribly afraid for another. But Gudovich knew his master.

"No, no," interrupted Peter; "my adjutant must be with me to do honour to the uniform I wear." For a moment or two he stood biting his thumb-nail in perplexity; then he swung round on Catherine. By a bright thought he could cover his failure with a jeer. "You hear? There is no room for you! No room for the Empress! And, by God! it's true! We must think of some other way. Come, Gudovich, let's be off." And turning on his heel he left the room, slamming the door behind him.

So long as the sound of voices could be heard through the closed door Catherine remained silent.

"It is true," she said at last, speaking as much to herself as to Orloff. "There is no room for the Empress; and no end possible but the one end. Kasbek is right. But what will happen when there is no Kasbek?"

"Perhaps," said Orloff, "there will be no Emperor."

CHAPTER XVIII

CROSS PURPOSES

IT had been but a doubtful satisfaction to Saintonge to find Ulrica Khitrovin alone. If night had not brought counsel, it had at least brought caution, which is counsel's other self; the cautious man may not be wise, but he rarely blunders into folly. Roop's earnestness had left its mark. It is open to argument that earnestness is the most potent influence in life. Love is often individual, centred upon the one or the few; faith without works is dead, and works are the earnestness of faith kindled into life and action. Let a weak man have a strong enthusiasm, and he not only rises to the level of his own earnestness, but draws others up with him. It is the leaven which leavens the whole lump. But, added to his earnestness, Roop was strong in himself and the mark he left correspondingly deep. The danger to France was more real, more imminent, than even Choiseul had imagined; the hell of Roop's image not impossible, and what a hell it would be! As were the Croats and Walloons of a hundred and fifty years before, coarse brutes, animal in desire and instinct, ruthless in gratification, so were the Russians of the day, and, linked with Prussia, they might yet make Paris a second Magdeburg. If the Alexius Orloffs were so callously indifferent, what might not be expected from the passions of the ignorant Dmitrys when their blood was fired with sack and lust for

plunder? "And," said Roop, "one hand might turn them back."

That was the thought present in Saintonge's mind when he found Ulrica Khitrovin alone, and with it there was the realisation that as sacrifice is often the child of love, so the greater the love the sorer the pangs of birth. If the hand which turned back was to be his, he must forget Ulrica Khitrovin.

Nor was the girl more at her ease. Outwardly it was the Ulrica Khitrovin of the drive from Dolgoburg, but she knew that inwardly there was a change; her confidence was the confidence of conscious art, and not of unconscious nature. Love is a flower which oftentimes grows in the dark, and blossoms without culture, striking its roots downward and its branches upward unsuspected. But Catherine's rough banter had been as a beam of revelation, and as she waited alone in the ante-room Ulrica knew that to her Paul de Saintonge was not, and never could be, as other men. Already the thought of him set the heart leaping and drove the warm blood faster through her veins, nor could she control the thrill which swept her nerves. The knowledge frightened her into the defensive; it would have shamed her to the very soul if Paul de Saintonge guessed the truth, giving no love in return. But a woman's defensive is rarely passive, rarely the strength which sits still. In her dread of self-revelation she is not content to seem indifferent and play a negative part, but, in her eagerness to make indifference abundantly clear, must needs fire a shot or two from the ramparts of her resistance. It followed, therefore, that there was little of the previous night's pleasant frankness in her greeting.

"Her Majesty is engaged with Monsieur Orloff."

"Then, Mademoiselle, I had better return later on?"

"That is as you please, Monsieur," she answered with exaggerated indifference. "But I heard her say she desired to see you. It was upon some question of frills and flounces, I think, as you are so lately from France."

"I thought the Empress had a mind above such trifles."

"Trifles, Monsieur de Saintonge! Why, you know they are our very existence! Did she not tell you yesterday that we adored French fashions—some of us! Is it still the custom to wear the *jupon* full?"

"Mademoiselle," answered Saintonge sourly, "I know nothing at all about it. Will Monsieur Orloff be much longer with the Empress?"

"Monsieur Orloff?" repeated Ulrica, startled for the moment out of her conscious art into unconscious nature by the remembrance of Dolgoburg, and the quarrel which was still unsettled. Surely they were not about to renew it here in the palace? That must be prevented at all costs. "You must not wait for Monsieur Orloff."

"Must not?" echoed Saintonge in his turn, uncertain whether to be pleased at the obvious alarm or nettled by its suggestion that he ran a risk in waiting. "And why not?"

"Oh!" She hesitated a moment, then went on rapidly, "Because Monsieur Orloff is my very good friend."

"I understand." And Saintonge bowed stiffly, stung by the sudden words into greater bitterness of speech than he knew. If there is no such healer as love, so are there no wounds like those which love can give. "Yesterday he was—what was your word? a beast! To-day he is your very good friend! I felicitate Monsieur Orloff. And, Mademoiselle, we are happy in being alike, for he is my very good friend also. But I am not waiting for Monsieur Orloff, and have no

desire to see him—none at all. I am waiting solely in the hope that Her Majesty may be graciously pleased to receive me."

"Then Dolgoburg——" she began, hurt and bewildered. The shots from her rampart were having a result she little anticipated and desired less. But Saintonge completed the sentence.

"Is already forgotten, as you, no doubt, wish it to be. My memory, you perceive, Mademoiselle, is as short as your own," and with another bow, stiffer than the first, Saintonge turned to the window.

The play of cross-purposes was complete, and both had, more or less, secured their desire. And yet, as is sometimes the way with secured desires, neither was content. He had sought to assert his right to any path he might choose to follow; she to make it plain that he was no more to her than any other man. In this they had succeeded and neither was content, for in their heart neither had desired that the other should believe. What they both wanted was to keep their cake of freedom, and yet eat the plums and sugaring. So in her corner she bent over her needlework, scarcely seeing the crooked stitches for the tears which rose to her eyes but never fell; while he, gnawing at his under-lip, looked out across the frozen river, and could not have told whether it was the Church of Our Lady of Mercy, or the Fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul which lay under his eyes.

The silence, like the darkness in Egypt of old, was a silence which might have been felt; through that silence the piercing shrillness of the Czar's strident voice came as a relief.

With his usual dislike to ceremony, Peter entered unannounced, and strode with short, quick steps midway across the room. There he halted, his head on one side, his jaw hanging open.

"Good morning, good morning," he said sharply,

acknowledging Ulrica Khitrovin's curtsey and Saintonge's bow with brusque nods. "Ah ha! Ah ha! I see you are a Frenchman all over, Monsieur I've-forgotten-your-name; the women come before the Czar. Eh? Ha! ha! ha!" and he laughed shrilly. "Perhaps you are right; though, thank God! I'm no Frenchman." Pausing, he straightened his meagre figure, his nervous hands smoothing the braids of his Prussian uniform. "No, by God! My King and I are soldiers! Eh, Von Goltz?" Then, as his gaze rested on the group which had followed him, his mouth widened in a slow grin. He had thought of a way to annoy Catherine, and was less afraid of her now that he had made her weep. "Have you seen the Empress, Monsieur?"

"No, Sire, not as yet; but I hope shortly——"

"H'm! I thought not! One at a time! One at a time! Leave her to the other and come with me. I'm going for a drive, and I'll show you—well, come and see something curious."

For an instant Saintonge hesitated. He understood the Czar's purpose as plainly as if it had been blurted out in so many words, and recognised that Catherine might reasonably take offence. But it was a way of escape, and he could always plead that the Emperor's wish was a command.

"If I may be allowed the honour, Sire."

"That is settled. Gudovich, see that Monsieur the-friend-of-the-Empress has a place in my sleigh. It will console him for his disappointment. What brought you to St. Petersburg, Monsieur?"

"Pleasure, Sire."

"And that is what will take me to Paris before long, but I take my pleasure differently from you!"

Again he laughed, but suddenly relaxing his muscles, he made a little gesture for silence and crept slowly forward. Opening the door of communication to the

inner room with noiseless care, he flung it wide and tiptoed quietly in.

"Our noble Emperor!" murmured Kasbek, but so softly that only Saintonge, who stood next him, overheard. "There is none like him in St. Petersburg—thank God! Now listen to his wisdom."

But as Peter's purpose was made evident the sarcastic smile on Kasbek's face gave place to horrified anxiety. If the Czar compelled Catherine to obey his whim it might be fatal; if she refused it would give him an excuse for a burst of passion, out of which some pretext for violence might arise, which would be no less deadly. Very quickly Kasbek made his way to Gudovich and caught him by the arm. He knew that few men had such influence with Peter; and remembered the hesitancy and distaste with which Gudovich had received the Czar's message at the supper-table.

"Premature, don't you think?" he whispered, "or at least inopportune. But only you or Von Goltz can interfere, and for heaven's sake let us keep Prussia out of our family quarrels."

It was then that Gudovich moved forward, his face impassive, his voice the voice of a man who respectfully sets right a superior's lapse of memory. It was the act of a well-ordered machine, the aide-de-camp was fulfilling a duty to his general, nor did Peter show any resentment at the intervention. Towards Kasbek it was very different. As he snarled his naked warning the Czar's face paled to a livid grey, blotched with fiery red over the thin cheek-bones, and he drew his small frame together, his fingers curved, his teeth set, like an animal about to spring.

But Kasbek met him eye to eye unwaveringly, and by his coolness turned aside the catastrophe. When he replied his words had all Gudovich's respect, but his tone was harsh and even threatening. At

the time those about him set down the unaccustomed roughness to a natural nervous tremor, due to the recognition of his risk, shaking his voice; but in the light of what followed a few days later, some asked themselves, Saintonge amongst them, if the lack of self-control was not part of Kasbek's comedy of sacrifice. The scene at least proved one thing—Roop was right when he said Kasbek was a dangerous friend. But the storm passed, and the success of the intervention has been already told; nor, as the group clattered noisily downstairs, was there any apparent vestige of the Czar's anger remaining.

To Saintonge's mingled relief and vexation, he had no further opportunity of speaking to Ulrica Khitrovin. His bow, as he left the room, was stiffly ceremonious, her acknowledgment no less formal, but had her head not been bent he might have seen a quiver of the usually steadfast mouth. Each in thought reproached the other. He told himself he had been mistaken in her, and Roop, his valet, was right; the few days at Court had wrought a change, for already, with the insult of Dolgoburg fresh in her memory, Orloff was her very good friend. And she, too, had been mistaken! Dolgoburg, he was careful to tell her, was forgotten; for fear or favour he had patched his quarrel with the man who had insulted her, and was no longer willing to risk his life for a woman's honour! And, woman-like, her heart grew miserable at the release from what, a few minutes earlier, had been so miserable a fear that she had lied. Truly Catherine's guess had hit the mark: Paul de Saintonge was not the same to her heart as other men.

In the street, or, rather, on the embankment—for the façade of the palace fronted the river—three sleighs were waiting. The first of these was filled with officers of police, the remaining two were empty, except for their drivers. By the side of the river a squad of

cavalry was drawn up, of these one half filed across the road as the sleighs moved away, the remainder trotting forward so as to enclose the Czar in a double line of horsemen. In their polished helmets, streaming plumes, and flying riding-cloaks of pale blue cloth lined with fur, their naked swords flashing from the shoulder, they made a brave show. And to make a brave show, to feed the Czar's love of military display, was their function. As guards they were unnecessary; to do Peter justice, he was never afraid to move freely amongst his people.

With his foot on the sleigh step Peter paused, his mouth twitching with nervous excitement. To play with soldiers was always dear to his heart.

"Hey! Von Goltz! The King will have no cause to be ashamed of the cavalry who follow his colonel when we ride together? What do you think?" But without waiting for an answer he turned smartly on Saintonge. "When we men of the north go a-visiting, Monsieur—ah—um—what is your name? de Saintonge? Oh, yes, de Saintonge: when we men of the north go a-visiting south, Monsieur de Saintonge, you'll find we can make ourselves at home!"

"France is always ready for guests," answered Saintonge. "Your Majesty may be sure we shall welcome you with arms as open as your own: so open that maybe you will not return at all."

At the careless words, significantly spoken, Peter stiffened, and would have retorted angrily, had not Gudovich stepped forward.

"Where shall I sit, your Majesty?"

"Eh? Oh! in front with Volkof; Madame's friend will come beside me." And waiting for no assistance Peter flung aside the heavy fur robe, and sprang into the sleigh. "Come, let's be off, and lose no time on the road; Gudovich, you know where to go."

"Is it permitted to ask our destination, Sire?" said Saintonge, as, seating himself on Peter's left, he drew the furs about his knees. He was growing accustomed to the Czar's shifting moods, but through every change it was clear that with him two things remained steadfast with the unshakable possession of mania—hatred of France, and a fanatical devotion to Prussia, France's enemy.

"There!" answered Peter, with a jerk of his head over his right shoulder, and following the motion Saintonge saw the sullen bulk of the Fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul frown grimly across the flat of the frozen river.

There! What the Bastille was to Paris, St. Peter and St. Paul was to Petersburg, but with a sinister difference—the door of the Bastille might, upon occasion, open outwards to freedom, St. Peter and St. Paul was as unrelenting as the grave. The air was bitterly cold, so cold that the Empress must have perished had Peter carried his point; but through the cold there swept, at the single significant word, a yet more biting chill, which was not of the icy atmosphere. There! Saintonge shivered involuntarily. Was the Czar playing him a grisly jest? Had Choiseul's letter, after all, contained something more incriminating than blank paper? "If Peter guessed your purpose in coming to St. Petersburg, you would disappear." So Breteuil had said, and his mission had been likened to dancing on a tight-rope with the oblivion of Siberia waiting ready in the gulf beneath. And now, with the police in front, the chief of the police behind, and a guard of cavalry on either side, he was nearing—There! Under the robe of fur Saintonge's hand instinctively groped for his sword-belt. He would at least end the jest to please himself, and to die at once would be easier than to live without hope.

But the Czar had already forgotten him. Stiff and upright as a lance-handle, his narrow chest pushed out to its widest, Peter sat staring straight before him. At his approach all the sleighs halted and drew aside, hats were doffed, and in their eager desire to do him honour the poorer folk knelt bare-headed in the snow. But the Czar passed them by unseeing. Only a military salute moved him to observation, and it he answered with punctilious ceremony.

The Emperor's attitude relieved the tension; such an evident indifference was impossible at the crisis of a successful *coup* to one of Peter's emotional temperament. He could not have hidden his exultation for a moment. But though Saintonge breathed more freely the lesson of the shock was not forgotten. Thenceforward he must never slacken his watchfulness, lest he should walk into such an open trap as for these terrible seconds he had feared.

Leaving the embankment, the foremost sleigh swerved slightly to the right down a sloping causeway, and, still trending to the right, turned across the Neva, the horses flying at a gallop. Straight in front the fortress rose sheer from the flat of the river, the slender spire of the Cathedral from which it drew its name lifting its sacred pinnacle toward heaven in abiding sarcasm. That way alone lay mercy, that way alone lay the open door of hope for the living already entombed behind the surrounding walls.

Once confronted with the fortress, Peter's face relaxed into an eager expectancy; it was as if an impatient child was on the threshold of its playground where a new toy awaited it.

"There!" he repeated, turning with a quick nod to Saintonge. "There!"

"To the church, Sire?"

Throwing back his head Peter laughed.

"The church!" he said, contemptuously flicking his

hand in the air. "That for the church! The priests would govern Russia if they could, but I'm God's Emperor and I laugh at them. No, not to the church, but to His Imperial Majesty, the Czar Ivan the Sixth."

CHAPTER XIX

IVAN THE SIXTH

ENGROSSED in the issue of the vital struggle—and it had been no less than a struggle of life and death —between Peter and Catherine, Saintonge had paid little attention to the actual words which had passed. It had been as when one watches a duel to the death; the mind is bent upon the effect of the thrust rather than on the nice skill of the sword-play. But such details are sub-consciously caught, and now Saintonge remembered. They were going to visit Ivan the Sixth! Ivan—the Czar who as an infant had reigned twelve months, only to be dispossessed by his remote cousin, Elizabeth, and whose every day of life for twenty years had been a tragedy cramped to the narrow compass of four walls. Ivan, who Peter had so cynically admitted was the legal possessor of the throne. And with the memory there came back the Czar's sharp passage of words with Kasbek, who had so unmeaningly and at such a risk to himself challenged Peter's anger. Why had he done so? What purpose did he serve? Saintonge knew of Kasbek's devotion to Catherine, and guessed at more than he knew. But that was no explanation. Gudovich had already intervened to shield her, and the danger had passed. Why, then, need Kasbek have so exposed himself?

The tilting of the sleigh as it ran up the sloping causeway to the level of the street disturbed his thoughts.

Their short journey was almost over, they had reached the right bank of the river, and now, by an abrupt turn, crossed the wooden bridge which linked the fortress with the mainland, a path so narrow that the cavalry could no longer ride abreast of the sleigh.

Before the gates General Sternberg, the Governor of the prison, was waiting to receive them, but there was no ceremony, no turning out of the guard, nothing to say to those within, the Czar has come! With the curtest of greetings Peter passed within and the doors were shut.

"Which way?" he said shortly.

"Down this passage, your Majesty."

"No, no; no Majesties, if you please. I am only Colonel Michailovitch; there is no need that the—the —other one should know."

They had formed into a short procession, of which Korff and Sternberg were the head, Peter and Von Goltz followed side by side, then Kasbek and Saintonge, Gudovich bringing up the rear with two or three of the subordinate officers of the garrison. Still under the influence of Roop's warning Saintonge remained silent; nor did Kasbek speak, though his eyes restlessly searched the uncertain dimness of the passages to right and left, as if his interest was deeply stirred.

Small wonder that so it should be. Since its erection nearly one hundred years before, no building had gained so sinister a reputation. In the uncertain light, a gloom relieved only by a deeper gloom where a corridor or an embrasured door thickened the darkness, a gloom made more intense and delusive by the swaying of the lamps they carried, it needed no effort of imagination to repeople its shadows with the many unhappy souls who had passed its gates, never again to see the light of the sun except from the scaffold, the wheel, or amid the faggots of their funeral pyre. Here a Czar's son, heir to the crown, had been done to death by order of

the father who gave him life. Here, untried and uncondemned, the victims of an infamous favourite had literally rotted their lives out in chains and filth and darkness, the more happy maddened by their misery and isolation. From here, north and east, along the great white road of hopeless wretchedness and untempered cold, had crept the long but dwindling processions of those condemned to the awful clemency of the Czar and the doom of living. Here, unknown, unnamed, forgotten, God's image grew to the brutality of the beast through cruelty and neglect, their cry unheard, their tears undried, the sorrows of their sickness unassuaged, alone in the bitter remnant of their life, alone in the awful passage of their death. That was the fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul. As it was so has it been, and as it has been so will it be until the sleeping conscience of the nation wakens. When that day comes, may it be that it will not waken to such an irresponsible delirium as that which laid its sister infamy of Paris in ruins, together with the system which it typified.

Presently an iron gateway barred their progress, then a second and a third. Beyond this last stone steps plunged into yet more utter darkness, and up the hollow foul airs blew softly in their faces, airs rank with the breath of men, the smoke of guttered tallow, the sour, repellent reek of filth uncleansed from year to year.

"Damnable!" Saintonge heard Kasbek mutter to himself as they paused, waiting, while Sternberg fumbled for the lock in the tenebrous gloom. "Damnable! Utterly damnable! And it is here they pen the Czar!"

But, so reckless was the whisper, more than Saintonge heard the words. With his hand upon the key Sternberg turned upon Kasbek.

"Monsieur, you said——?"

"I said what all think," answered Kasbek. "The

only difference is I spoke my thoughts. This is hell itself."

"And, like hell, there is no escape," replied Sternberg, shooting the bolt with a clang that set an echo flying in the lower gloom.

"Is that so sure?" sneered Kasbek, and again Saintonge marvelled at him; he seemed so bent upon pushing himself forward into a dangerous prominence for no clear gain. "I believe that an indomitable man who knew and understood the risks——"

"Come and try, Monsieur," interrupted Sternberg. "You would find that men are not long indomitable in St. Peter and St. Paul."

"What's that?" cried Peter, pushing forward between them and turning sharply from one to the other. "Escape? Who said escape?"

"Monsieur Kasbek, your Maj——"

"No majesties; I told you that before. Why should I have to repeat an order? And Kasbek's not the only one. My good friend, the King of Prussia, has written me very urgently—but I'll speak of that later on. Is it down these steps, Sternberg? God in heaven! what an abode for the Czar! How can they breathe! How can they live at all! I say!" and he paused abruptly, making a little gesture to his forehead as if a new train of thought had struck him. "Sternberg, have you women here?"

"Not many, sir."

"And do they live long? Eh, Sternberg?"

"No, sir; a year or two at most."

They had reached the bottom of the steps, and in the dancing light of the hand lanterns carried by Sternberg's lieutenants, Saintonge saw Peter lay his hand suddenly on Von Goltz's shoulder; his eyes brightened, and he opened his mouth as if about to speak to him. But instead of speaking he laughed, and nodding his head, turned down the passage.

"A year or two? That is a long time to wait, and we must see more first," he muttered; then, raising his voice, "Is this the place? Then open the door, Sternberg; but no Majesties, you understand."

The cell into which they looked with sharpened curiosity was of good size, about seven paces long by four wide, Saintonge judged. In one corner a short wooden bed was fixed upon four stout posts driven into the floor; a small oak table having a stool beside it, and both immovable, occupied the centre of the cell, and were, with the bed, its sole furnishings. Facing the door, a long, low window pierced the five-feet thickness of the wall; it was heavily barred, its ledge just beyond the finger-tips of a tall man's reach. Upon the bed, his chin on his breast, his hands on his lap, sat Ivan the Czar.

To raise his head and stare vacantly as the door opened was his only sign of life; then, as Sternberg advanced towards him, he stumbled clumsily to his feet, so clumsily that he staggered as if his joints were unaccustomed to rapid action, and shrank back, his open hands thrust out palm forward before his face. The gesture was one of abject terror, and was as eloquent as it was significant. Through what horrors of repressive subjection, unrelieved by one touch of human tenderness, had not this nephew of Peter the Great lived out his twenty years of deposition!

But as Kasbek, with an exclamation of pity, moved forward, the Czar interposed, thrusting Sternberg brusquely to one side, and the two cousins, the Emperor who had been and he who was, confronted one another.

They were a striking contrast; the one smooth-shaven, narrow-faced, small even to insignificance, his military trappings displaying rather than concealing his stunted proportions, his every movement of abrupt and nervous rapidity; the other, broad-shouldered, with big, loose joints and coarse, strong, clumsy limbs,

his hair cropped like a peasant's, his beard untrimmed, his dress a dirty white jacket close buttoned over a pair of rough and much-worn trousers.

There was a moment's dramatic silence in which Ivan's hands sank slowly down to the level of his breast. There he held them, the one clutched upon the other and drawn close to his body.

"Can he speak?" said Peter at last, excitement sharpening his voice harshly. "Hey! You, whoever you are, what is your name?"

"I—I—Ivan." He spoke in stammers, in the end jerking the name out with an effort. It was as if the muscles of his tongue, through long disuse, had passed beyond control.

"What else? Have you no other name? Ivan who? Ivan what?"

"Ivan the Czar!"

This time there was no stammer. He braced himself erect, his big limbs straightened themselves into a rude dignity, and his eyes lit up. The soul of the dull colossus had stirred within him, wakened by an almost forgotten memory. Again there was a pause, and Saintonge could see Peter's mouth working convulsively. Rumour had lied; this man was less of a fool than the outer world supposed, and the less a fool the more a danger.

"Who told you that?"

"No one," and his voice was still round and full. "There was no need to tell me, I remember; that is not the sort of thing a man forgets."

"Then who put you here? Who keeps you here? This is a prison. Who keeps you in prison if you are the Czar?"

"Vile, wicked people—vile—vile! It was years ago, many years, more than I can count, but I don't forget, I don't forget."

"And who is Czar now?"

"I am! I! Ivan! The Czar must always be the Czar!"

"Yes," persisted Peter; "but who is the Czar outside?"

"I don't know," and as he spoke Ivan's face grew dull. But only for a moment, and then again the eyes lit up, this time with the fury of an animal. "But I'll know some day, and never fear but the day I know he will know that I know!"

"How so?" asked Kasbek. He stood behind Peter, and spoke over his shoulder, so that Ivan in replying looked the Czar almost straight in the face.

"Because I'll kill him—kill him—kill him—kill him with these!" he said hoarsely, his clenched and outstretched hands thrust almost into Peter's face as he bent forward in his gust of passion. "And the day will come; I know it will."

"But how do you know?"

"Because God tells me so. Every night He comes and tells me so. That is why I am not afraid to be alone in the dark. God is there, and He tells me."

At the threat, spoken at once with confidence and a fierce vindictive hate to which the wild gesture lent both edge and emphasis, Peter had winced, shrinking back almost into Kasbek's arms. Now, at the assertion, declared with no less confidence, Kasbek felt him shiver convulsively. To air a flippant scepticism was one of the Czar's foibles. To Saintonge he had sneered at the Church, his intonation full of an arrogant assumption which argued a claim much more tremendous than the mere words suggested. It was as though he said God's Emperor was God on earth, and so above the Church, all priests, and all religion. But, like many another man whose words are stouter than his courage, Peter's unfaith was a mere veneer, thinly covering a mass of disordered superstition. Through this veneer Ivan's words had crushed as a stone crashes through a skin of seeming-solid ice, stirring up the mud beneath. Not for an instant did he doubt the truth of the assertion,

but even in the very moment of conviction the cunning side of his ill-balanced mind discovered itself.

"God?" he muttered, speaking his thoughts aloud. "If God has told him that we must be careful—more careful than ever."

Sternberg overheard him and his face flushed; his skill and cunning as a keeper of men was aspersed.

"Careful?" he said. "More careful? That is impossible. No one sees him but myself, and the key of his door never leaves me. The security is absolute. Look at the bars, look at the walls!"

It was Kasbek who answered.

"Bars may be cut, General," he said jeeringly, "and I see your window is broken. Are you a marksman, Colonel Michailovitch?"

"Hey? What do you mean by a marksman?" replied Peter, following the newest thought with characteristic readiness. "Of course I can shoot, as every soldier can."

"I will wager what you please that I can shoot straighter."

"I take you; but when? where? with what?"

"Now, here, and with this!"

Taking some papers from his pocket, Kasbek selected one or two carelessly, tore them in halves, rolled them into balls between his palms, and with a dexterous throw flung one through the broken window.

"I hope I shall hit no one outside, General? The river runs under the wall, does it not? I thought so," he went on, flinging a second ball through the opening, as Sternberg nodded. "Two bullseyes to me! Now, Colonel, it is your turn."

But Peter's dignity was wounded.

"Monsieur," he cried shrilly, his face flushing with sudden passion, "I am not here to play the fool, and when I shoot it will not be with paper balls! Von Goltz, tell that to the King our master."

"That," said Kasbek, "will be interesting news to Monsieur de Saintonge."

"Saintonge?" retorted Peter. "Pish! I've said the same to Breteuil, and I'll say it to a greater than either of them before long, and at close quarters. Come, Sternberg, let us get out of this."

At the door Kasbek paused until the others had all passed out.

"God be with you, sir," he said respectfully, but though Ivan raised his head he made no reply. He had sunk back upon the bed and sat as before, his hands in his lap, his chin on his breast. Perhaps he was listening for the voices which came to him as they had come to Joan of Arc of old, comforting his growing madness with that whisper of hope without which life is unendurable.

Once in the passage and with the door securely locked, Sternberg turned to Peter.

"Are you satisfied, Sire?"

"I don't know; I must first talk to Von Goltz."

Increasing his pace, he caught the Prussian by the arm, and for two or three minutes they spoke together in earnest whispers; then as he urged his point with vigorous insistence, Von Goltz forgot caution and his voice rose audibly.

"The King my master urges it strongly. Free, he would be a terrible danger. Think, Sire, what mischief a hot-brained malcontent might work; even here he is a menace."

"I'm not afraid of him, but I know the King is the wisest man on earth. Yes; I will take his advice. Then there is Catherine——" and Peter's voice trailed off again into a whisper, both his arms swinging in the air in the excitement of his emphasis.

"Caution," replied Von Goltz. "In that the King advises great caution. If a second Empress died within three months—that would be dangerous."

"Died? No; disappeared!" replied Peter, his voice rising sharply. But at a warning touch upon the arm from Von Goltz he broke off. "Stand further back," he went on, motioning with his hand impatiently; "further still—further. Now let no one move until I give permission," and turning again to Von Goltz he took him by both elbows and pushed his mouth up almost to the Prussian's ear. But his arguments failed to convince, and again and again Von Goltz shook his head.

"You are master," he said at last, "but the world will need proofs."

"I am more than master, I am Czar!" replied Peter, striking his breast with his open hand. "And what I will I do. For what else did God crown me? If the world asks proofs, I shall say I am above the world and my word proof enough. That will do, Von Goltz, that will do: my mind is made up. But first to settle about this fellow. Sternberg, I shall move him to Schlusselburg; Von Goltz and I have decided that is best. Have a covered sleigh ready at eleven three nights hence. I will order the escort. We'll see if God will follow him there, eh, Von Goltz?"

"Sire, Sire," cried Sternberg, "what have I done to forfeit your Majesty's confidence?"

"Nothing, as I shall prove to you before long. You say you have women down there; do women attend them?"

"No, Sire, we trust men only."

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter," answered Peter with careless irrelevance. "I think she prefers men in any case. Come, Von Goltz."

"Then, Sire, three nights hence at eleven?"

"Yes. Korff will arrange details as if it were a common police affair."

In the return procession it had fallen to Kasbek and Saintonge to bring up the rear.

"Three days hence?" repeated Kasbek. "Then my paper balls will not be required to mark the window after all. It was a clever idea all the same, and under his very eye, too! Your very clever person is often easiest fooled. Saintonge, will you do me a last favour? Breteuil has vouched for you as one of us. Be with the Empress four days hence; she will need you."

CHAPTER XX

METIUS CURTIUS LEAPS INTO THE GULF

THROUGH these four days Saintonge deliberately avoided the Court. The more he realised the gravity of the part he was now so unwillingly called upon to play, the clearer became the necessity that he should not, by any ill-considered, hasty action, prejudice his position. At all times evil tongues are hung more loosely than those which speak well of their neighbours. And of the gravity of his part he had accumulating proof.

It had not been difficult, it was not difficult, even then, to treat Choiseul's fears lightly. The statesman, like the feed lawyer, is pledged to see but one side of the truth. Breteuil was but the living echo of Choiseul, and therefore carried no greater weight. Roop, the valet—Saintonge turned from contemplation of Roop the valet with a shrug of his shoulders. His opinion was strengthening that Roop, the valet, was that most soiled and soiling of political tools, the hired spy, and as such would lie brazenly for whosoever paid him. For the second Roop, the Roop who had seemed to be the hanger-on to Orloff's skirts, the Roop whose place on the chess-board he could not as yet quite determine, he had a larger respect. The man, he believed, was honest both in purpose and conviction. So, too, was Kasbek, the noble fool laying down his life for his cause. But, after all, they were biassed witnesses, and

politics seemed to have this much in common with horse-dealing—the suppression of the truth is no lie if it brings about an advantage.

These being discredited, who, then, remained? Peter himself, and it was out of Peter's own mouth that Saintonge stood convinced; but because of the very source of this conviction there was the greater need that he should act circumspectly. To raise the suspicions of one so prone to extremes would be dangerous, to afford an excuse for precipitating a crisis might be fatal. So for these four days the thistledown of Provence was drifted hither and thither by all those winds of pleasure which blow nowhere more warmly than in the north. Alexius Orloff had sufficiently recovered from his bruises to redeem his promise, and what Alexius Orloff did not know of the pleasures of St. Petersburg was not worth the knowing, while much that he knew had better have been left unknown. Together they proved that Laval told the truth when he said men—and women too, for that matter—played high in St. Petersburg. Together they drank as Saintonge had drunk with Roop at Dolgoburg, but with prudence. In such things Saintonge was no better than his times, but he never forgot that Orloff was without ruth or scruple, and that upon the discretion of his tongue hung issues greater than his own safety. Together they heard the chimes at midnight. Together they found that ginger was hot in the mouth. Together they clattered swords on little or no provocation, all after the manner of their kind in every age when the blood is warm.

Once—it was at a gaming supper given by Mercy d'Argenteau, the Austrian Ambassador—the Czar grew amiably drunk in their company, and, Breteuil being absent, found Saintonge the Frenchman a ready butt for his coarse and intemperate pleasantries. But Versailles had taught Saintonge both patience and dissimulation. In his character of the frivolous man of

pleasure it was an honour that the Czar should condescend to jest with him. He bore the boorish bludgeon-play of Peter's wit smilingly, so that not even Orloff at his elbow could have told whether or not he understood the significance of the Emperor's sinister vapourings. Then came the morning of the fourth day.

Notwithstanding his late hours Saintonge was a light sleeper. At the touch of a hand upon his shoulder he wakened and looked up. The room was still in darkness and with little more than the faint grey which the reflection of the snow flung through the uncurtained window even at midnight. Above his bed stooped Anton Roop, a wavering candle in his unsteady hand. Through the gloom, or perhaps because of the gloom, the valet's face looked ashen, and as Saintonge raised himself upon his elbow he heard Roop swallow his spittle noisily; nor did he speak for a moment. Then—

"Kasbek is dead," he said hoarsely. "Get up at once. God knows what will happen next."

"Dead?" repeated Saintonge, too dazed with sleep to grasp fully the meaning of the words. "Monsieur Kasbek is dead?"

"Dead!" repeated Roop. Then he added hastily, "But I know nothing about it, nothing at all. Please remember—always remember—that I knew nothing at all about it."

"Nothing about what? Kasbek dead? Great heavens! When? How?"

"Last night or this morning, I don't know which, I don't know where, and I don't want to know; it was on the road to—to—hush!—the road to Schlusselburg." His voice sank as he spoke, and looking apprehensively over his shoulder, Roop shivered, drawing in his breath with a whistling sound, as if the very name of the prison hurt him.

"How do you know——"

"I don't know," cried Roop, his voice rising sharply in its passion of frightened protest; "you must not try to fasten knowledge on me. I know nothing, nothing at all, but—Kasbek is dead."

"Last night on the road to Schlusselburg?" said Saintonge, his mind rapidly working backwards. "I think I understand."

"No, no, no; you understand nothing; you must know nothing, it is too dangerous. How can we tell what will happen next? How can we tell what the Czar—God save His Majesty!—who knows what the Czar may do?"

"Do we care what he does? Pah! You are a fool as well as a coward. Why should we care? What have you or I done that we should care? Light the lamp and then come and dress me. Kasbek dead? Kasbek! Poor Kasbek!"

"No one dreamed it would come so soon."

"That what would come?"

"The—the—attempt."

"Then you knew?"

"No, no!" cried Roop again. "I knew nothing, nothing at all."

"Then why are you shivering? Light the lamp as I tell you. Look how your hand shakes! And it is you—you—a coward like you, whom they sent——"

"I am sent as your servant, as nothing more than your servant, nothing at all!" The phrase seemed to comfort him, for he repeated it again and again. "Nothing at all, nothing at all, just your servant."

"Then," said Saintonge, flinging back the blankets, "never forget your place as you forgot at Dolgoburg, and have once or twice since; for if you do, by God! I'll kick you into the street. Now, then, tell me how Monsieur Kasbek died."

But Roop could not easily shake off his terrors, and it was only by dint of asking many questions and

piecing together broken morsels of information that Saintonge arrived at a fair conception of the facts.

"A covered sleigh on the Schlusselburg road? Why call it the Schlusselburg road? Why not the road to Ladoga?"

"Because the sleigh came from St. Peter and St. Paul, and what leaves St. Peter and St. Paul by that road goes to Schlusselburg and to nowhere else. It is like taking from one pocket to put into another."

"And who was in the sleigh?"

But at once Roop froze.

"I know nothing—nothing at all."

"It was guarded?"

"By both cavalry and police—about fifty altogether. That is anyone's knowledge who saw it pass, and there was no pretence of secrecy."

"When did it leave St. Peter and St. Paul?"

"Soon after eleven last night."

"What happened, and where?"

Roop hesitated. By this time his hands were steadier, but every now and again his teeth caught at his lip nervously, and his face was still strained like that of a man on the watch.

"Monsieur, it is only hearsay——"

"Bah! What a coward you are! Speak out, man."

"Monsieur, it is dangerous to know that which the police do not want you to know. But it is said—I do not say it is true—that about twenty of the guard rode in front, twenty behind, with five or six on either side of the sleigh; and that about a mile from the city where there is a cross-road from the north which winds round by a fir wood on the left, and curves slightly downhill, Monsieur Kasbek was waiting——"

"How do you know it was Kasbek?"

"Because he is dead, Monsieur."

"Dead! I can hardly believe it! What a man he was—what a man! Well, what followed?"

"He managed badly," went on Roop, shaking his head. He quite recognised that it behoves a man who conspires to be very careful and make no mistakes. "He not only shouted and so gave warning when he should have been silent, but he galloped ahead of his troop——"

"How many were there?"

"Ten—fifteen—twenty—no one is very sure; it all happened in three minutes."

"Go on. He shouted and galloped ahead?"

"Yes, Monsieur; it was the act of a fool——"

"Keep your opinions to yourself, you who know nothing."

"But, Monsieur," expostulated Roop, "Truly, and on the face of it, it was the act of a fool, From the shelter of the firs he might have shot half the guards, and then charged down upon the rest with a crash when they were in confusion. The musket fire would have demoralised them, and no men's nerves would have stood it."

"I see you understand tactics," answered Saintonge grimly. "Next time you will be put in command, and then you will know all about it! Unless you are killed, like Kasbek! Meanwhile, what happened? Must I always be asking questions?"

"At the shout the sleigh was drawn down the cross road to the right, and the guards from before and behind formed up to the left, six deep, facing the attack. But no attack came, only Monsieur Kasbek reached them; he had his sword drawn and charged at the gallop. When twenty yards from them he shouted again, 'God and the Czar! Long live Ivan the Sixth!' and was into the troop like a bird to the net. And like a bird in a net he was lost! The centre of the foremost line staggered because he rode like fury, even a regiment would have staggered, but the sides doubled in upon him, wrapping him up as you would an egg in

a napkin and crushing him as you might crush the egg. There was a moment's scuffle. So packed were they and so jostled there was no room for a clean thrust; nor, in the dark, could they have known him from one of themselves if he had kept silence. But he would not—he would not! 'Ivan! Ivan! the Czar!' he cried again, cried it like a man in a holiday crowd, 'God save the Czar! God save Ivan! God—God——' he cried no more, except in a gasp and a sob, and the confusion quieted."

Roop broke off. Little by little excitement had quickened his voice, and as he told his tale his eyes brightened. The coward in him had taken courage from another's courage, as is the way ever with cowards. But the brief silence calmed him, and when he spoke again it was with a subdued solemnity; life had passed into death, and the chill of the Presence he dreaded was upon him.

"He was dead as he sat in the saddle, stone-dead, bunched forward on the withers. And, Monsieur, it is very strange. I suppose it is because there was no room for a blow, but there was no blood on his sword, none at all, not a smear, and not one of the troops was hurt."

"And what of those who followed him?"

"They did not follow him. Fifty yards up the rise of the road they halted. Then, when the Czar's guard——"

"Whose guard? Is Ivan the Czar?"

"It was a slip, Monsieur, nothing but a slip. I mean when the prisoner's guard formed again, healing up the road, they turned and galloped away; nor could they be followed lest the guard left behind should be insufficient. They say that for the five minutes of uncertainty General Sternberg stood by the open door of the sleigh with his sword drawn, and had Monsieur Kasbek broken through there would have been a swift end of—of—whoever was inside."

"I don't doubt it," answered Saintonge drily. "And perhaps the Emperor will not thank Sternberg for his restraint. But only Monsieur Kasbek is dead?"

"Only Monsieur Kasbek."

"Only Kasbek!" Deeply sensible of their sardonic pathos, Saintonge repeated the words over in his mind: "Only Kasbek!" Metius Curtius had leaped into the gulf alone, no man clinging to his skirts. Kasbek, the noble fool, had followed the road he had so steadfastly chosen for himself, and the world, through the mouth of Roop, had already hailed him as a fool, not accepting his nobility—which is the world's way. The world must itself have at least some small possession of a quality before it can recognise its existence in the individual, and where was nobility to be looked for in the world as typified by such a one as Anton Roop?

But Saintonge, nearer akin to Kasbek, had a clearer vision. Metius Curtius may be legend, but he stands for that which is highest and greatest in humanity, that which draws nearest to divinity, the deliberate self-sacrifice of the one, by the one, that the many may gain. As he sat piecing together Roop's imperfect story, his feet pushed out to the wood fire and the light of the lamp paling to a sickly yellow in the slow dawn, it broke upon Saintonge how single-minded this man had been. Careless for himself he had been careful for all others. Not even in the heat of battle, not even in the bitter pangs of death when nature, shrinking from dissolution, struggles for survival, had he raised his sword against a countryman, nor had one of those who followed him suffered loss.

And now, what followed? Through Metius Curtius Rome had been saved from threat of destruction to march to her Imperial destiny: would Kasbek by a like sacrifice save his mistress who, to him, was the life and power of Russia? The necessity for the sacrifice was clear. Peter's fears, intent upon Catherine's de-

struction, must be diverted elsewhere. Yes, the need was plain, but would the gods accept the offering? That, surely, must have been the one black horror which through these four days and at the last had haunted Kasbek. To lay down a life deliberately, and lay it down uselessly for no value received, is surely the greatest waste known to a wasteful world. And yet, in the nature of things, there could have been no assurance. But that had not caused him to pause. A meaner-souled man would have asked himself, "How do I know?" and in the doubt have found a door of escape from duty. But Kasbek found no such door. It was the best he knew and he did it.

Saintonge's face grew very grave at the thought. The dead Kasbek spoke as the living Kasbek never could have spoken. With fearless faith he had put in practice Roop's theory, that it may be given to one man to turn aside a stream at its source which, later, grown a torrent, an army cannot stem, and the man of practice is always the man of influence, let the man of words be never so splendid in theory. And how swift the man had been to act, how certain what the end would be, how chivalrously careful that his mistress should be comforted—"On the fourth day she will need you!" And now Kasbek was dead as he had foreseen.

CHAPTER XXI

EMPRESS AND WOMAN

THE streets gave no hint of excitement. Uncertain of the extent of the conspiracy, Von Korff feared lest any demonstration of anxiety should encourage an upheaval. Ivan the Czar was more than half forgotten. It was better that those who did not remember should not be reminded, lest memory bred questions difficult to answer except by the arguments of the sword. In politics the man forgotten is already dead, to recall him to life would be a fatal error. Only round the purlieus of the palace was there any activity, and there the play of uniforms and glint of steel created no remark: was not the Czar a known fanatic of Militarism?

Within the palace a more fevered nervousness was evident; the guards were trebled and the lower corridors hummed like a busy camp. At the gates Saintonge was challenged, and, in ignorance of the password of the day, found himself helpless. He knew no Russian, the officer in charge spoke no French, and the dilemma was fast growing in exasperation when, in the midst of a harangue of much sarcastic passion and but little intelligence to the listener, Saintonge found his hand caught roughly from behind. The interruption jarred upon his mood, and he turned angrily to find a big-shouldered lumbering figure on its knees, and a broad, russet-bearded face upraised to his.

"Dmitry!"

At the sound of the name the peasant nodded, broke into a laugh, and hugging the hand he held to his breast, would have kissed it had not Saintonge snatched it forcibly away.

"Get up on your feet, man—up,—up, I tell you! And how is your mistress? How is Mademoiselle—— But, pish! I forgot, you cannot understand me."

With his hand on Dmitry's shoulder he turned again to the officer, and pointing from one to the other and then to the palace, indicated in dumb-show that here was one who could vouch for him. The pantomime was successful. After a brief parley, during which Dmitry drove home his assurances with an embarrassing but obviously unaffected devotion, Saintonge was allowed to proceed, a soldier following him for precaution's sake.

"Take me to the Empress, my friend," said Saintonge, clapping his guide's broad back, and again Dmitry nodded, showing his big teeth in a smile. Naturally His Highness, who had been such a good friend at Dolgoburg, would desire to see his mistress. Then the good-humoured face clouded and he shook his head sorrowfully.

"She is not happy. She says nothing—who is Dmitry that she should say anything to him of such things? But, my lord, I love her, and love sees things —yes, love sees things. She is paler and she does not laugh as she did. Then there is——"

"My friend, will you please make more haste?" interrupted Saintonge, motioning forward with his hand. "You know very well I don't understand a word you say."

But Dmitry understood no such thing. That His Highness should speak a language incomprehensible to him was nothing wonderful; what was he but a clod of the earth! But doubtless His Highness could, if

it pleased him, speak all languages: if, indeed, there were more than two—Russian, and this other, which Dmitry doubted.

"My lord, just one little minute before we go to her. You remember that other?" The hairy face grew red with passion, and at the back of his throat Dmitry growled like a dog. Indeed, he had many of a dog's qualities—instinctive love, instinctive dislike, and a readiness to fight at his mistress' bidding which gave absolutely no thought to consequence to himself. "He is here, and she will not let me twist his neck. That is because she does not like to see things hurt; but you will tell me if I should do it? His or another's? You are a man and you know, my lord: his or another's? You will tell me? My life is yours; you know that?"

As has been said, Dmitry had even more intelligence than a dog, and there was no mistaking that his eyes spoke appeal. In reply Saintonge nodded, emphasising his assent with a hand on the peasant's shoulder: he was impatient to move forward.

"Yes, yes," he said, using one of the few Russian words he had learned.

"Good," answered Dmitry, stretching out his arms and turning his open, sinewy hands this way and that to demonstrate their capabilities, and how easily the twisting process could be carried out. "His or another's, for you are a man, my lord, and you know. Now that all is clear between us we may go on."

Dmitry led him up the stairway and along the galleries, made familiar by his previous visit, to the door of the ante-room. There his progress was barred by the servants in waiting: a bear in a boudoir would have been as congruous as the big-limbed, uncouth peasant in the gorgeous setting of the newly decorated Winter Palace. But though refused admittance he was well known as Mademoiselle Khitrovin's attendant, and through his offices Saintonge found his last difficulties

removed. Following the servant he crossed the room to the door through which Peter had tiptoed the week before; this was thrown open, and his name announced with an utter absence of ceremony.

"Monsieur de Saintonge to see you," and then the door was closed.

But instead of the Empress it was Ulrica Khitrovin who rose to meet him. For a moment there was the silence of an embarrassed surprise. Then the woman recovered herself. It is one of nature's compensations to a woman for her weaker physical strength that she is commonly stronger than the man in her self-control, and more consummate in the art of concealing her weakness.

"To see me?" she repeated, with a subtly suggestive emphasis on the pronoun. "What! Monsieur de Saintonge, have you so soon forgotten that you had forgotten?"

"Forgotten what, Mademoiselle?" With the tragedy of the night still heavy on his mind, Saintonge was less quick than usual in what the Scotch call the up-tak'.

"Monsieur, I ask your pardon for reminding you that when we last met you had been pleased to forget Dolgoburg."

"Mademosielle, I forgot nothing until you forgot."

"I?"

"Monsieur Orloff was your very good friend. That meant you had already forgotten Dolgoburg. How could I presume to remember what it was your pleasure to so soon forget?"

Again there was a silence, and, ten feet apart, they looked into each other's eyes with a coldness which was almost anger. In a certain stage of its progress, before assurance and faith grow to peace, love is like the sensitive plant, at even a chance touch it shrinks upon itself, and lo! all is barren.

"And you could believe it of me?" she replied at last, nor was it clear whether the pain or the protest in the voice was the dominant note.

"Believe it? Why, you said——"

"Oh! but you men are dense—dense. At Dolgoburg you and Monsieur Orloff quarrelled." She paused. The sweet, strong face grew wistful, gentle, almost tender, and a deeper colour crept into her cheeks. "Monsieur de Saintonge, my memory is not so short that I have forgotten the cause. Then you came here, and Monsieur Orloff was in this room with the Empress. He might have returned at any moment—oh! cannot you understand?"

"But he boasted that within a week——"

Again she interrupted him, and in her indignation, protest had overborne pain.

"Boasted? Monsieur de Saintonge, have you no good women at Versailles? Do you believe every vile word a light man speaks lightly of a woman? Or do you think that because Monsieur Orloff persists——"

"Persists?" cried Saintonge angrily, "Monsieur Orloff persists? Monsieur Orloff dares to persist? It is intolerable that you should be so pestered: Mademoiselle, you must give me leave to stop this persistence."

"And what would the Court say?" With that swift change which is another of nature's subtle defences, she turned from protest to raillery, from scorn to playfulness. "Are you my long-lost brother returned from France? *Merci!* Monsieur de Saintonge! but no man can safeguard a woman from persistence who cannot safeguard herself. I am not afraid. Besides, there is always the Empress."

"But what if there is not always the Empress? And what are you two foolish children quarrelling about? Surely to-day, of all days, we should hold together."

It was Catherine who spoke. To Saintonge there

seemed the gravity of a profound anxiety in her deep, full voice. Her face was pale almost to greyness, the forehead wrinkled, the eyes dull and lifeless, the lips drawn back against the teeth, pushing into sharp prominence the curved lines on either side the mouth. But through the anxiety there was no suggestion of fear. Even in her hours of utmost danger—and they were many—Catherine was never a coward. Though anxious, her anxiety was rather the strained watchfulness which, unafraid, guards vigilantly against the unknown, that vice-king of all the terrors. What blow might not Peter strike in the agony of his perplexed fear? Metius Curtius had indeed leaped into the gulf, but had the gulf closed her mouth?

"Have you heard that Kasbek is dead?" she went on, without a pause. Then she raised her voice, till, standing as she did near the door, it might have been heard in the outer room. "Dead in arms against the crown! Kasbek, whom I thought my friend! Had you heard?"

"Madame, he bade me come to you to-day——"

"Hush!" And now the full voice fell to a whisper. "Why should he bid you do anything? And by a rash foreknowledge of his purpose would you risk the fruits of the noblest sacrifice a man has ever made? But you know?"

"Roop told me."

"Roop?"

"My servant."

"Oh! that Roop?" and Catherine's voice was contemptuous as she nodded comprehensively. "Monsieur de Saintonge, do not blame us unfairly. All manner of tools go to the building of a house, all manner of men to the welding together of an empire; such a man as your Roop—and Kasbek!" Seating herself at her writing-table, she motioned Saintonge to draw nearer a chair. "Ulrica, child, stand thou

close to the door and tell me if—if—there is need to tell me anything."

"Shall I stand on this side of the door, Madame, or the other?"

"On this, on this—where Peter's spies cannot see you. I told you before you carry your secrets in your face, and to-day you would need the stoniness of the Sphinx. Now tell me about Kasbek."

"His request, Madame, or the manner of his death?"

"Both."

Some women would have winced at the bluntness of the latter half of Saintonge's question, but not Catherine. Nor, mobile as her features could be at times, did her expression change throughout his recital. In as few words as possible he told of the visit to the fortress in the Czar's company, of the trick played by Kasbek to identify the window, and so pave the way for an attack from the outside; of the Czar's close questions as to women prisoners, of the final decision that Ivan should be moved to Schlusselburg, and Kasbek's whispered request passionately urged. Then Saintonge paused. Easily moved himself to generous emotions, he thought surely so great devotion would touch a heart swayed with such notorious ease by the adoration of men. But there was no change; the stolid, brooding face remained stolid. The highway to Catherine's affections was through the desire of the eye, and not through the apprehension of the strong brain. It was not Catherine the woman who listened as Saintonge spoke, but Catherine the Empress, and the two natures were distinct: Saltykof, Poniatowski, Orloff, might bring the light to the eyes of the one and soften the lines of the stern mouth, but not the dearest of them all, or of those who followed, could at the height of her caprice easily move the stubborn will of the other. Messalina might weep for a slaughtered lover, Semiramis

but set her face like a flint when a pawn in the game of Empire lost itself that the Queen might be saved, or so it seemed.

And yet, stonily though she bore herself, two things pled for her with Saintonge—the strained, pathetic watchfulness of the face, and her splendid courage. Not even the gross, suggestive hint of a woman prisoner dying by hours through an over-long two years could make her flinch. Still more curtly Saintonge told his story to the end.

"And since that day, that day at St. Peter and St. Paul, you have not seen him?"

"No, Madame; he avoided me."

"And me also. But that was natural. And yet, no! I am wrong! It was unnatural, except in Kasbek. How many men do you know who would go to their death in silence, and without warming their courage with a farewell? But if he would not come to me, I must go to him, and bid my faithful friend and servant good-bye. Will you come with me, Monsieur de Saintonge, or are you afraid?"

"No, Madame, no; though God forbid that I should for a moment pretend to his spirit."

"Then come," and as Catherine spoke she rose.

"But where?"

"Did you not know? He is here—actually here in the palace. The Emperor wished to see with his own eyes the blood of the first man his troops had ever slain in war! Think of it! One man charging a regiment, and his corpse made a spectacle to the curious! Does that not show you there are not many such men in Russia? Devotion must be rare indeed when we make a gazing-stock of it."

At last the flint had come to life! Through the deep voice there vibrated such a sudden intensity of passion as set Saintonge's nerves tingling, and thrilled him till he shivered. As she could love so could she

hate, and as there was no restraint in the one, so would there be no pity in the other. And yet it was not all scorn, not all bitter despisal. She, too, understood the pure greatness of the sacrifice, and through the Imperial flintiness the woman was touched to the heart.

"Madame, there is one at least——" began Saintonge.

"Ah, Monsieur, what have you to do with us?" she interrupted. "This is your French chivalry, your generous French emotion stirred by a woman's loss. Make no mistake, Monsieur Kasbek died for an idea; now you——?" She paused upon the half-formed question. The stony hardness was gone from her face, and if there was no smile upon the lips, the dark eyes searched him very kindly. Saintonge completed her sentence.

"—offer myself to the incarnation of that idea. Pity my weakness, Madame, and forgive me if I am not so noble as Kasbek, but flesh and blood are always more easily loved than abstract propositions."

"Then you love no flesh and blood, Monsieur?"

"Madame, I—I——" It was Choiseul's question in another form, but this time Saintonge had no answer on his tongue. To the man he had told the truth, but what was he to say to the woman, with another woman standing by?

"You pause? Take care, Monsieur, take care; the gift you offer may be claimed." Her gaze wandered from his face to the figure motionless by the door, then back again full to the eyes. "And are you sure it is yours to give?"

"My devotion, Madame——"

"Oh, Monsieur," and again she interrupted him, "there are so many devotions which men offer to women. Which is mine? The devotion of a chivalrous French gentleman for a woman in sorrow? the devotion

of a brave man who wears a sword to a Queen who may need its aid? Come, let us test the devotion; and I tell you again it will need some courage on your part. Kasbek dead is even more dangerous than when he was alive. Ulrica, child, remain here. It is possible that Monsieur de Saintonge may return."

And what could Ulrica do but curtsey, and say, "Yes, Madame," though her heart burned within her, and the lips of the firm mouth trembled.

CHAPTER XXII

THERE WAS NO OTHER WAY

FOLLOWED by Saintonge, Catherine led the way across the outer room, and down the corridor to a part of the palace which was strange to him. Everywhere she was greeted with respect, and twice or thrice she paused to speak a few unceremonious words to those she met—a grizzled sergeant, a beardless lieutenant; Catherine was never one to despise apparent trivialities. Who could tell but that one or other of them might some day have his use? To one, a simple private, she gave her hand to kiss, and when she passed on there were tears on the man's cheek.

"He was a sergeant," she said to Saintonge, who walked by her side a foot or two behind. "He served Russia faithfully for twenty years, and the Emperor reduced him because he had one button awry. I do not think he will forget." Nor did he when the time came to remember.

At the end of the corridor a small iron stairway led downwards past the ground floor to a flagged passage in the basement. To the front it was ill-lit by sunk windows, but at the back excavations permitted of better light, and in that direction Catherine turned. Here also were groups of soldiers, their muskets resting against the wall in easy readiness to their hands. But midway along the passage which ran the length of

the rear there was a break, and the groups were divided by a void space guarded at either end by sentries. Out of this void space there was a short passage to the left, with a doorway a few feet down it on either side.

One of these doors was closed, the other open, and as she paused before the latter, Catherine laid her hand on Saintonge's arm for support. It was the first sign of womanish weakness she had shown, and so natural was its exhibition, so spontaneous, so suggestive alike of need and of trust, that it moved him deeply. It was the touch of human revelation which had hitherto been lacking. Instinctively, almost involuntarily, and without the faintest thought of gallantry, but rather in a simple gesture of compassion and comfort, he covered her hand with his. Thus for a moment they stood upon the threshold.

The room was ill-lit by two windows which looked out upon the rear passage, but no dimness of borrowed light could soften the harshness of its naked angles, or disguise the grim purpose which it served. The walls and groined roof were whitewashed, the flooring of grey flags. In the centre lay Kasbek, stretched upon the stones, but muffled from head to feet in a white sheet. At the coming of the Empress the chattering of the soldiers had quieted, as a rookery quiets at the sound of feet underneath, and the room was very still.

"And yet there was no other way," she said, and moved forward. "Monsieur de Saintonge, let me see his face."

Her hand had fallen from his arm, and they now stood on either side of the shrouded head. But instead of obeying, Saintonge pointed dumbly downward in protest. There was no need for words; the reddish-brown stains showing in patches through the sheet were eloquent. Kasbek could still speak for himself.

"Nevertheless, do as I ask," said Catherine, replying to the gesture. "It is too late to be afraid of blood."

"But, Madame, are you sure of yourself?"

"Never more sure," she answered; and though the voice was low, as became such a presence-chamber, it was full and firm. Catherine was always strongest in the height of a crisis, and most sure of herself when the need was greatest.

There was nothing for it but to obey. Stooping on one knee Saintonge drew the sheet slowly down until the dead face lay clear in the grey light; then he paused. Surely that should satisfy her? But it did not.

"Lower," said she in the same even voice. "Lower still, and let me see what he suffered for my sake that I may remember."

Still upon his knee, Saintonge glanced up at her. The gay trimmings of her skirt, silk beribboned and embroidered in many colours, brushed the dead man's shoulder, and she stood bent forward, her face straight above his. But it was passionless, null as ice rather than hard as flint; and yet not without effort, for the breath came quickly, and the fingers were doubled in upon the palms.

"How far, Madame?"

"To the waist. In his life he told me nothing; let his death tell me all."

"But, Madame, it will be—painful."

"His wounds are mine; let me see my wounds."

Again there was nothing for it but to obey. He had been stripped to a loose undershirt of fine cambric, unbuttoned and open at the neck. This the drying blood, adhering to the sheet as Saintonge drew down the covering, opened yet wider, laying bare the breast. There were three wounds upon it, and every wound a door wide enough to let out the life. Nor were these all. Not even Cæsar lay wrapped in a redder shroud.

Instinctively Saintonge's eyes had followed the slow disclosure; but as the edge of the sheet fell from his finger-tips, he again glanced upwards, and as he raised his head, Catherine's nerve broke. As if her joints had suddenly failed her, she sank half-crouching on her knees in collapse, her face buried in her hands, her fingers overflown by a rush of unrestrained tears. And in her passion of grief, as in all things base or noble, the strong abundant nature of the woman showed itself. She could do nothing in little. The sobs which shook her came from her convulsed throat in groans, and she so swayed, that Saintonge, leaning across Kasbek, laid his hand upon her shoulder to steady her lest she should fall.

"Madame, Madame, for God's sake control yourself! Your sorrow will be misconstrued, or read too rightly. Remember what Von Goltz said four days ago. You must not give them what they seek, you must not, you must not. The world must have no proof, the Czar no excuse. They will ask who is Kasbek that you should weep for him, and if they find an answer it would be fatal. And would you have Kasbek die in vain? Would you rob his spirit of its victory? Would you endanger . . . some one is coming; listen, Madame, listen!"

Down the passage sounded the scuffle of heavy-footed feet, followed by the noisy clang of musket-butts grounded on the flags; then again there was absolute silence, unbroken even by a footstep. With the one impulse both rose, and were standing upright and apart with the dead between, when Peter paused upon the threshold. He had come in haste, like one who had been summoned, for he breathed quickly; but though he had come in haste, he had come without noise.

"Tears!" he said mockingly, his eyes twinkling with cunning. "Hey! Madame the Empress! So you weep because a traitor to the Czar is dead? Those who

weep for traitors must themselves be traitors! Von Korff! Sternberg! Come here both of you."

"Sire, Sire!" cried Catherine. "Spare me such humiliation."

"Bah! Do you think it ends here?" answered Peter roughly. "By God, no! For years I have had to wait, but now I am the Czar. Do you see her, Von Korff? Do you see her, Sternberg? Look at what lies at her feet. You know how it came there, both of you; you know how he died and why; that he died a traitor! a traitor! a traitor! Now look at her face. Why is she crying? What can these tears mean but one thing? Why should the Empress, the Empress, mind you, weep to have such a thing as that at her feet? Why? Unless it be—ah ha! unless it be—eh, Madame Resource, clear yourself now if you can."

Little by little the Czar had lost control of his voice, until at last it ended in a scream, half triumph, half nervous passion. The muscles of his face twitched as with the workings of a fit, and he waved his clenched fists on either side of his head, beating the air aimlessly. But Catherine never flinched, nor, when she answered, had Saintonge ever heard her voice more steady. She spoke slowly, coldly, and if an emotion broke the level of her tone it was a touch of indignant but contemptuous protest. And yet, facing her, behind the almost irresponsible power of the Czar who hungered for her destruction, stood Von Korff and Sternberg, the significance of whose presence it was impossible to mistake.

"Must I stoop to justify myself? Am I—the Empress, as you say—on trial before these gentlemen? And for what? Because my woman's weakness is found in tears! Is it so strange that I should weep? Yesterday I thought I had a friend—I, who have so few friends. To-day——!" she paused, and Saintonge, standing three feet away, could not for the life of him

tell whether the little pathetic gesture of helplessness was natural or dramatic. "To-day I find I have no friend, and His Majesty suspects me of sedition, suspects me, the Empress!"

"No," said Peter, "no, no." He was growing frightened, as he always did when Catherine asserted herself. "But when you come to cry over such a scoundrel——"

"Oh, Sire, is it possible you do not understand? General Sternberg, how did this man die?"

"Very bravely, Madame."

"I do not mean that: he was Russian and a soldier, that he should die bravely was a thing of course. But why did he die? With what object?"

"Attempting to set free——" Sternberg paused, uncertain how, in Peter's present mood, to describe his prisoner.

"Ivan the Sixth," said Catherine. "And if Ivan the Sixth by Kasbek's help pushed his Majesty from the throne, must I not have fallen with him? Sire—Von Korff—surely you understand? Would we not fall together? What place have I except by grace of his Majesty?"

"That's true," said Peter with an oath; "no place at all. But for me you would not be Empress. Eh, Von Korff, Madame Resource is right there?"

"Oh, Sire," replied Von Korff hastily. "I am only present now by your Majesty's orders." The balance of power was again changing, and it seemed wise to temporise.

But Sternberg was less pliant. He was still smarting from what he held to be the Czar's loss of confidence in the removal of Ivan to Schlusselburg, and in his eagerness to re-establish his position his zeal misguided him.

"It still remains true," said he, "that Madame was in tears."

"Oh, Monsieur," retorted Catherine with bitter sarcasm, "it is easy to see you are universally beloved and never deceived; no doubt because of your gentle mercies and trusting nature. But when we women are deceived we weep. Monsieur Kasbek was my friend, and yet he drew sword against the Czar."

"Yes," replied Sternberg doggedly, "that is all very fine, but why weep since he is like that?" and he pointed to the stained sheet.

"Monsieur, you forget yourself when you speak thus to the Empress. Or do you by any chance think you are already my gaoler? But you, Sire, have a right to an explanation. I wished to see for myself, and let Monsieur de Saintonge see, how your brave troops used their swords."

"Sternberg, why do you keep annoying the Empress? She is right all through; that is the devil of it, she always is right. You and Von Korff may go; I won't want either of you. And you brought Saintonge that he might see also? Gad! That was a joke; that is Madame Resource all over! I must tell that to Von Goltz, it will amuse him—Saintonge of all men! Don't forget, Saintonge, don't forget." And, laughing loudly at the quaint conceit of a Frenchman brought to see for himself how Russians could use their swords, Peter turned away. It was a jest after his own heart.

Stooping, Saintonge drew the sheet upward over the quiet face.

"Let there be no more tears," he said, "and be sure, Madame, that what you remember I shall never forget."

But he did not return to the ante-room. How could he, being a passably honest man?

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LOGIC OF NECESSITY

AS day by day the weeks slipped into months, Paul de Saintonge enjoyed life hugely. The twin devils which had plagued him day and night at Versailles were exorcised, and he who had been the butt of one Court was the fashion of another. Nor was his simply a golden popularity. He had played his part well, so well that both his paymasters were satisfied, and expressed their satisfaction in solid remittances. If his shoes were not pure gold they were at least well gilded, and with the gilt so polished that few could have detected the deception.

And yet Saintonge himself was not deceived, which is to his credit, since self-deception in prosperity is the commonest vice of life. He knew that so far his gilt was like fairy gold, and as fairy gold may at any moment shrivel into dead leaves, so might his gilding fade to much-worn leather, very down at the heel. To change the metaphor: his gourd flourished vigorously, but there was a canker-worm—he was sorrowfully conscious that he had secured no real hold upon Catherine, and not a shred of influence over the Czar. The feast of life was delicious, the meats savoury to the palate, the wines the most delicate, the music the sweetest, the fragrance of the flowers a sensuous delight. It was a time of laughter and riot, of the gaiety that borders on the recklessness of fever, but through it all Saintonge

was uneasily certain that the hour of reckoning was one day nearer with every rising sun.

But meanwhile Kasbek's sacrifice was justified. As the gulf closed in the forum when it had swallowed up Rome's most precious possession, so the shadow of immediate danger passed from Catherine with Kasbek's red burial; the good—in this instance—was not interred with his bones. Von Korff had failed to catch the threads of a conspiracy in favour of Ivan, for the good reason that there were none to catch, but his very failure alarmed Peter. Such a bold attempt argued, they both agreed, a widespread disaffection, and he ascribed the miscarriage of the plot to the haste with which the conspirators were compelled to act. That it was the tragi-comedy of one man was unthinkable, and in his consternation at Von Korff's failure to lay bare the intrigue, Peter left Catherine in peace.

How, through these months, the undercurrents of which Breteuil had spoken gathered strength, Saintonge could not tell. Neither Breteuil nor Peter Paul Roop took him into confidence. For them it seemed sufficient that he played his thistledown part, and that he played the part successfully Saintonge had almost persuaded himself when—it was on a day towards mid-June—Breteuil sent for him.

The ambassador was in his cabinet, where he had received Saintonge the day after his arrival in St. Petersburg, and his greeting was curt to exasperation.

"Well, Monsieur, you don't progress?"

"There we differ," answered Saintonge, his voice as sharp as Breteuil's own. "I came to St. Petersburg unaccredited, unknown, and now——"

"Every gaming-table, every supper-room, every haunt where men and women squander their hours, their money, and themselves, knows you well. Is that progress? For a time you did well, so well that I reported to Monsieur de Choiseul that I thought the

trick was as good as won. You know what followed? Your pay was increased, you drew upon me as if—as if—you were Choiseul himself, with the whole Treasury at your back. Do you know, Monsieur, that in four months you have drawn eighty thousand francs—you who never before had the tenth part of eighty thousand sous? And from Monsieur de Laval you received in the same time more than half as much. A hundred and thirty thousand francs in four months, Monsieur de Saintonge, and nothing to show for it, nothing at all, not that much!" and Breteuil snapped his fingers.

"I had to live like a gentleman," answered Saintonge. He had kept no account of his expenditure, and was too much startled at the magnitude of the total to resent the outburst.

"Like a gentleman!" echoed Breteuil, bringing his open hand down with a crash upon the desk by which he sat. "Are you Soubise? Rohan? The King himself? that you must spend fifteen hundred louis a month? And for what? That is the real point. For what? If you filled Orloff's place the price would be none too much. If you even had the key of a certain little private staircase we all know of, and which has changed hands more than once, the price would be cheap enough. But you draw and you draw and you draw, and there's nothing to show for it all. After Kasbek's death all things were possible. So far you had done well. The Empress singled you out, made you her confidant both in public and private, and all things were possible. You were her very good friend, and we know what that means in Petersburg. You had only to stretch your hand out and pluck. But did you stretch your hand out? Did you pluck or even attempt to pluck? No! You drifted away from her, drifted into extravagance and high play—with the King's money, Monsieur de Saintonge! How was that? Why did you drift?"

"You are mistaken as to the plucking. After

Monsieur Kasbek's death the Empress appeared to have no further need of me."

"No further need of you?" echoed Breteuil contemptuously. "Are you serious? Is it not your business to make yourself a necessity? At least for a time! Do you think that to gain the end in view it is enough to be well-built and passably good-looking? to dress in the fashion? to scent your clothes and bow with a flourish——?"

Saintonge rose to his feet and turned to the door.

"Monsieur de Breteuil, I am not here to be berated like a schoolboy or a valet."

"No? And why are you here—here in St. Petersburg at all? And when you leave here where will you go?"

"There is always the river."

"And what of the King's eighty thousand francs? Bah! let us have no melodrama!"

"Then I can return to Paris and say I have failed. Monsieur de Laval's fortune will more than repay the King. You know as well as I do what failure costs me with Laval and who benefits. But, Monsieur de Breteuil, it is less melodrama than you think. I prefer the river to your insults."

"Insults? No, no; I never meant that. But, Saintonge—sit down again and I'll try to control my tongue; it says more at times than I really mean. And can you wonder that I lose my temper? You are not the only one hit by failure, and why is there failure at all? You began well, so well that, as I have told you, I wrote to Choiseul telling him the game was as good as won. Because of that report, your pockets, full before, were allowed to run over into the very gutters! Then you trailed off into failure for no earthly reason, unless for one which I shall come to presently, and by your failure you compromise me—me!—compromise me twice over. Monsieur de Breteuil has been blind. Monsieur de Breteuil has allowed a young gentleman

more astute than himself to dip arm's-length into the public purse—shortly, Monsieur de Breteuil is a fool! Am I to be made a fool of and not lose my temper? And why should I seem a fool, and why should you fail?"

He paused, leaning forward towards Saintonge, who had again seated himself. His tone had moderated, and nine times in ten the insult, or the sting of the insult, lies in the tone rather than in the words. It is quite possible to tell a man that he is a rascal, a wastrel and a vagabond, and yet at the same time convey that you have an affectionate regard for him which ranks him rather nearer than your father and much closer than your brother, just as the smoothest flattery, spoken in words of butter and honey, may be made to bite like a whip-lash dipped in vitriol. But Saintonge, though he accepted the half apology tacitly suggested by Breteuil's explanation, made no response. It is a wise man who says nothing when he has nothing to say!

"Is there a reason?" went on Breteuil, yet more soberly. "And is the reason called Ulrica Khitrovin?"

"Once before, Monsieur de Breteuil, I asked you to leave that lady's name out of this—this—discussion."

"I know, I know, but we can't leave it out. Unless, indeed, you assure me that my reason is no reason, and you are utterly indifferent to that very charming person?"

"Mademoiselle Khitrovin is nothing to me."

"No, but you may wish that she should be? Eh? You don't answer? Saintonge, you have a frank countenance, and it's just as well you do not attempt to lie. How, then, can we keep Mademoiselle Khitrovin's name out of the discussion, as you call it? But I can promise that I shall say nothing offensive; she is a young lady of whom I hear nothing but good. Indeed, I am told she has only one fault—she is as poor as you will be if you fail Monsieur de Laval. Now, Monsieur de

Saintonge, I am an older man than you are, older both in years and experience; and though you have made me seem like a fool, I am not quite such a fool as you have made me seem. I can conceive something like this happening, and don't interrupt me until I have finished. I can conceive your undertaking a—a—duty, shall we call it?—a duty which was repugnant but still necessary for someone to fulfil. Circumstances were too strong for you. We are babes, Monsieur de Saintonge, and circumstance is our nurse, where her arms carry us there we must go. But disloyalty to love was no part of the repugnance, and so you came to St. Petersburg. Then—do not grow restive, it is only my deduction—the woman intervened, and the repugnant duty which had been tolerated because there was no disloyalty to love became intolerably repulsive. I don't blame you in the least; love grows of itself, and no man knowingly sows the seed in his own heart. If I am right in my deduction, the point is that it grew, and disloyalty to love went to strengthen the repugnance. So—again I say, I don't blame you; if circumstance is our nurse, love is our master—you cast about for an excuse to evade the duty, and found it in the clearing of the air which followed Kasbek's death."

With eager promptitude Saintonge seized upon the suggestion.

"Not an excuse but a reason—an unquestionable reason."

"An excuse," repeated Breteuil drily; "an excuse and nothing more. What had you to do with reasons? You had your orders, and they were never withdrawn, never modified."

"But Kasbek's death did clear the air; you must admit that?"

"For the Empress; but you are not in Petersburg to make the rough places smooth for the Empress, you are here that the Empress may make the rough

smooth for France! Has the Czar ever abated his rancour? Not a jot! Not a jot!"

"Still," persisted Saintonge, "the air did clear, and because it cleared the Empress had no longer need of me, and kept me at arm's length. She does so still."

"Then bend the arm, and place yourself inside the crook, Monsieur de Saintonge, and do it quickly. Surely it is no bad place to be, the clasp of the arm of such a woman as Catherine? And now is your opportunity. The air is not so clear as it was; it is even thicker than while Kasbek lived. To convince you that I speak the truth, I will tell you a secret which not even I am supposed to know. This very day the Emperor gave orders for her arrest, but Munnich considered it still dangerous, and for the moment Peter was overruled. By this time she knows it, and, trust me, the arm will bend easier."

"But," objected Saintonge, "if she is in such danger for herself, how can she make the rough smooth for France?"

"What is that to you? You have your orders, leave whys and hows to others."

"It matters this to me," answered Saintonge slowly; "I love Mademoiselle Khitrovin."

"Since when?"

"God knows! Since always I think."

"And she?"

Breteuil spoke quietly, even sympathetically, and without the smallest trace of either raillery or censure in his voice; nor, so asked, did the curt question seem impertinent; rather, it was the complement of the simple statement. As he answered, Saintonge shook his head. He, too, spoke very quietly. It was as if the men, who in their quarrel had changed their rapiers for foils, had dropped the foils and walked arm in arm.

"God knows!" He said a second time. "Sometimes I think one thing, sometimes the other, but always

in the end I ask myself, Who am I that she should waste a second thought upon me? This thing was hanging over me and I dared not speak. So I have played the fool here and there; have, as you say, gamed and danced and drank, have made pretence of love that I might forget I loved, but never forgot, never, not for an hour. And though I dared not speak, I think she understands."

Breteuil nodded comprehendingly and there was a short silence. The crisis was a serious one and needed very careful handling. That such a man as Saintonge should be so humble, showed that he had indeed found a master in the power of love.

"What do you propose to do?" Breteuil asked at last.

Saintonge laughed, except that the sound of laughter is not necessarily what is commonly understood as laughter at all. It may mean scorn of another, it may mean self-contempt, it may mean one of twenty things which have merriment in them. There is no mood, no emotion, which laughter will not express. There must, because of joyousness, be much laughter in heaven, and assuredly there will be much in hell. Saintonge's laughter sounded like its echo.

"If I win I lose, and if I lose I lose, for she will despise me either way," and Breteuil did not need to ask what the loss was nor who the she. "Is it necessary, Monsieur de Breteuil, inexorably necessary, this burden you would lay upon me?"

"Laval?" Again there was the same quietness, the same sympathy, but as Breteuil spoke the word it was at once an assertion and a warning. As such Saintonge understood it.

"Damn Laval! I think less of Laval and its acres than I did once."

"France?"

"That is what I mean by necessary."

Leaning aside Breteuil struck the handbell which stood upon his writing-table.

"Ask Monsieur Roop to be so good as to come to me," he said to the servant who answered the call, nor until Roop had entered did he or Saintonge speak again.

"Roop, Monsieur de Saintonge requires to know whether or not he is necessary in St. Petersburg?"

"Months ago I told Monsieur de Saintonge my opinion; I was aware at the time that he doubted me, but my opinion remains the same."

"But he disagrees; he thinks there is a change since then."

"What has changed?"

"The necessity. He has reasons of his own for——"

"Thinking there is a change?"

"No, for wishing to believe it."

"And we know the proverb,—the wish is father to the thought! No, he is wrong. There is no change."

"But," said Saintonge, "Kasbek's death——"

"I warned you against Kasbek," interrupted Roop. "I was right then, you saw that for yourself afterwards, and I am right now. I told you then, gain the Empress, and I say it again to-day, gain her at any cost."

"But she has no influence. To-day she was threatened with arrest."

"Is that true?" and as Roop turned to Breteuil, Saintonge could see the muscles about his mouth stiffen.

Breteuil nodded.

"Yes, but she is safe—for the present."

"For the present—for the present; yes, I see we must hasten——" He broke off and turned again to Saintonge, "You were saying——?"

"That the Empress has no influence."

"She is the only one who can save France from attack. The Czar is arming. True, it is against Denmark, or they say so, but it will not end with Denmark.

If he joins with Prussia and launches these arms against France she is lost."

"But will he launch them? That is the point." Saintonge's throat had grown dry, and he could hardly command his speech. "To me this is so—so—serious that I must have more than ifs."

The room was very quiet as Roop looked at Breteuil before replying.

"Am I to speak?" he asked, and again there was a pause. Breteuil's face was very grave, the lines upon his forehead deeply marked.

"Yes," he said. "I believe you may trust Monsieur de Saintonge."

"Thank you, Monsieur: yes, whatever it may be you may trust me."

"Then," replied Roop, "I do not believe they will be launched—by the Czar."

"Then by whom?"

"By his successor."

"His successor! But the Czar is only thirty-four, is in good health—I saw him only yesterday?"

"You asked my opinion and you have it," answered Roop. His face was even graver than Breteuil's, and his voice grated harshly.

"But how——"

"That is enough, if not too much. Do you want me not only to put my head in the halter, but to pull the noose tight? I can say no more. But as I was right about Kasbek, so am I right now."

"It seems to me you are not trusting me fully," replied Saintonge slowly.

"I am trusting you so fully that if what I have said was known outside this room my life would not be worth a sou."

"Launched by his successor? By Paul?"

"A boy of eight years old? Nonsense!" said Roop, with a snap of his fingers.

"The Empress?"

"The Empress! Who else? Was it for Paul that Kasbek died? Though, indeed, it was not for the Empress either. It was for Russia,—for Russia. Because only such strong hands as Catherine's can grasp these loose, gigantic limbs of ours and knead their clay into one corporate whole. For that she must have peace; for that there must be no war with France."

"There is a flaw in your argument," answered Saintonge. "What has all this to do with me? I have no credentials; I am not the ambassador of France. Peace is Monsieur de Breteuil's province."

"Then Monsieur de Breteuil has not told you that he has already demanded his passports from the Czar, the tension is so great?"

"Monsieur, you are leaving St. Petersburg?"

Breteuil nodded.

"It is almost war," he said gravely.

"But I—what can I do?"

"What you came to do; win and hold the Czar's successor. At any cost," he added "do you understand, Monsieur de Saintonge, at any cost, and do not think I reckon the cost a light one. It is the heaviest a man can pay."

Yet again there was silence, this time more prolonged. It seemed to Saintonge as if the pent-up undercurrents had suddenly broken bounds in flood and he a helpless wreck adrift upon their tumult. Roop had not convinced him; there was still a flaw in the argument, and yet he had no answer ready. His brain was in a whirl, nor could he compel his mind to any clear sequence of thought. Certain facts he could grasp, but the deduction from these facts, their logical sequence, evaded him. From these facts two stood out beyond the rest. The crisis of a tremendous plot was imminent, war against France was imminent—Breteuil's demand for his passports was proof of that—

and these two ran neck and neck a desperate race towards catastrophe. These two facts he grasped and believed, but how he, Paul de Saintonge, could drag back the one and leave the other to ripen to its desperate consummation he failed to understand. And yet he could not mistake either Roop or Breteuil, could not mistake the significance of Breteuil's last words. It was Metius Curtius—Kasbek—over again, and where they threw life he must throw love and honour. And why? To gain what end? In the whirl of his brain that question came uppermost over and over again. "Why? Why? What end?"

And at last—it was all within twenty seconds—a possible light came. He had been told he might act as a diversion! At the time it had been a sneer, but the sneer might conceal a truth. If the Empress amused herself with some new folly it would lull suspicion, and divert attention from the quickening crisis of the plot, and the province of a diverter is to create a diversion! Well, he would play the part.

"What are your orders?" he said to Roop.

"My orders? I have none. I am only here at Monsieur de Breteuil's request to make the situation clear to you. Having done that I leave you together."

"Then is Choiseul's letter withdrawn?"

"Certainly not, but the time for orders has not come."

"But it will come?"

"How can I tell? Only the Duke's letter is not withdrawn; no! not by a hair's breadth!"

"What does all that mean?" asked Breteuil, as the door closed behind the Russian. "The Duke was right," he went on, when, very briefly, Saintonge had recounted the story of the two envelopes. "One day or another you will have to take your instructions from some such man as Roop. I must keep clear of all connection with—with—what is to follow. That is one

reason why I am leaving Petersburg. But you are different; as you said a moment ago, you have no credentials, your acts are your own and not your nation's. What you may do binds no one but yourself. Monsieur de Saintonge, I advise you most earnestly to follow Roop in all things."

"By follow, do you mean obey? Let us use plain words."

"Well, obey him then."

"In all things?"

Breteuil hesitated before replying. Better than Saintonge could guess he knew how tragically the crisis of the growing plot might develop, and therefore how far-reaching was the possible scope of these three words.

"In all things," he said at last, and said it with emphasis; "but remember that the blame lies with the brain and not with the hand."

"Roop has told me that already. But there will be blame?"

Again Breteuil paused, shifting uneasily in his chair. This blunt questioning was stripping into stark nudity the desperate probabilities which his diplomatic mind loved to clothe in a garment of euphemisms until they were almost unrecognisable. In the end he took refuge in Roop's evasion.

"How can I tell? But you cannot build a throne on flowers and sweetmeats. Meanwhile, we have got away from our point. You asked was it necessary—you understand what I mean—and Roop has answered you. Are you satisfied?"

Then Saintonge broke out.

"God in heaven, Monsieur, no, I am not satisfied! I love Mademoiselle Khitrovin as I did not believe a man could love a woman. I worship her, I reverence her—but I spare you that, for you would not understand. And loving her as I do, I am to lose her, I am to feign a damnable lie and disgrace myself. Well, let it be so.

You say it is necessary, you and Roop, and you know; but I tell you this, you are asking more of me than Kasbek asked of himself when he charged one against fifty, and knew what the end must be."

"I admit it all," answered Breteuil gravely. He was too wise to talk patriotic platitudes to such a man at such a time. Kasbeks are rare. To most men the individual is king in his own life, and, driven into a corner, Saintonge found himself traitor to Saintonge. To recognise the sacrifice and pass on was the only possible course. "But are you sure of yourself? Remember, the ball was at your foot once before."

"Let us leave the past alone; it will be wiser for both. What are your instructions?"

"There are none. You know the object to be gained, and I trust you implicitly."

"And how do you know I shall not fail you, as I am failing the woman I love? But I won't, this time I won't."

"I am sure you will not. I leave St. Petersburg on the twenty-fifth. The night before there is to be a Court ball, at which, of course, I cannot be present. There will be your final opportunity. I do not say make good use of it, for I trust you implicitly. But, Monsieur de Saintonge, I do say, let me take with me to Paris the news that you have a—a—an understanding with the Empress."

But Saintonge, rising, left the room without a word.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE PINCH OF THE GILDED SHOES

THE question was once asked, Where are Heaven and Hell? Within you, was the answer. Nor, of the many hells which man has the faculty of creating for his own torment, is there any deeper or darker, or where the worm gnaweth more inexorably, than when love, loving with all its soul and strength and spirit, desiring with passionate hunger, deliberately shuts the door upon its own hope. Neither is it any consolation that it is a man's own hand, moved by his own will, which shuts the door. If anything that knowledge sharpens the agony.

So Saintonge realised as he went out from the coolness of Breteuil's cabinet into the hot June sunshine, and with the realisation came the conviction of another truth which most men prove for themselves at one time or another—a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.

There was once a ruler of his people, wise beyond his peers, who gathered to himself silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces; who piled possession on possession, gratification on gratification, until the list staggered belief and there was no more room for appetite; then, drawing as it were a line, he summed up the total as vanity, profiting nothing. And, again, there was once a servant who entered his master's presence with his heart dancing in the pride

of wealth beyond the seeking of even his avarice, but he went out from that presence a leper as white as snow.

Gehazi, one judges, was allowed to retain his talents of silver and changes of raiment, but it may be doubted if thereafter they gave him much satisfaction. Saintonge, it seemed probable, might in his turn, by success in his mission, win the Laval golden shoes, but—though most likely he had never heard of Gehazi—he would have admitted a certain kinship, a certain similarity of circumstances. There had been the same self-satisfaction, the same blinding the eyes to possible consequences, the same sudden destruction following the peace and the quietness, the same sense of being thenceforward an outcast; and, worse than the personal humiliation, he had to lay bare his leprosy to Ulrica Khitrovin.

From Breteuil's cabinet Saintonge went direct to the palace. In more than surgery a seeming swift brutality is sometimes kindest; nor, this time, was there any difficulty in gaining admission. In the months which had passed since Dmitry's intervention on his behalf, Saintonge had become both a privileged and a popular figure at Court, where, naturally, he had attached himself to the party of the Empress. He had, so far, no definite plan in his mind, nor any clear idea how he was to play his part, nothing but a clean-cut resolution that no matter how circumstances led him, he must play that part according to his new conception of it.

"The Empress is receiving?"

"Yes, Monsieur, but not the general circle."

"Very good." He had picked up a smattering of Russian, not much, but sufficient to speak and understand simple phrases. "You may remain here, I can find my own way."

In the outer room of Catherine's apartments, and in the immediate neighbourhood of the door, there were more servants than usual, and had Saintonge been less

preoccupied it would have struck him that all did not bear themselves as servants do who have been trained to fetch and carry for an Empress. These—there were six or eight of them—kept discreetly in the background that their stiff carriage and weather-coarsened hands might not too plainly hint the barracks whence they had come, brought by Orloff at the first rumour of Catherine's threatened arrest. It was the beginning of revolution, the first countermove to the hitherto unchallenged authority of the Czar. But Saintonge, like Peter himself, was blind to what lay nearest him.

And certainly the inner room was free from all outward suggestion of plot or counterplot. Versailles itself had never been gayer with laughter and flippant talk, but, as had happened once before at Versailles, a silence fell as Saintonge crossed the room to join the group, a silence full of significance to those who understood the gravity of the position. They might laugh and jest as if there was not a single crumpled rose-leaf in the lap of their pleasures, yet some, at least, knew that every time the door opened it was possible, probable even, that death might enter. But the silence was only for an instant, and with the relief of his recognition Saintonge's welcome broke out, a little franker, a little more boisterous than common, just because the tension had been so sharply drawn.

Above the gay chorus a woman's voice made itself heard to the accompaniment of a clapping of hands. It was the Princess Dashkova, Elizabeth Vorontsof's younger sister, but none the less Catherine's staunchest partisan.

"Monsieur de Saintonge! Monsieur de Saintonge! Come here! Come to me at once. You have arrived at a good time. Madame! Let us ask Monsieur de Saintonge! He will decide between us."

"Then, Princess," answered Saintonge, "tell me which side you are on that I may be sure to be right."

"That is very pretty; but supposing Her Majesty and I disagree?"

"But who can suppose the unthinkable? You, Princess, who are a philosopher, know that is impossible."

"Fie, Monsieur de Saintonge, you are laughing at me, and are as elusive as the wind. Madame, shall we ask his opinion?"

"Oh!" said Saintonge. "If it is only my opinion you want, then there is no doubt but that I can please everybody, and be on both sides. Opinions are only a question of twisting words."

"Fie, again!" said Catherine. "Is that the way you deceive us poor women?"

"Madame, we must defend ourselves as best we can."

"And from what do you defend yourself?"

"I was wrong! I could not defend myself if I would, and I would not if I could; I capitulate and throw myself upon your mercy."

"Princess, what shall be done with your prisoner?"

But before the Princess Dashkova could answer the laughing question, Saintonge had gone down on his knee before Catherine, and lifting her hand kissed it.

"I yield only to the Queen," he said.

"Oh, Monsieur," answered Catherine, "you carry your jest too far. Is there no one else who claims you captive?"

"No one, Madame, nor ever shall there be."

Though she gave him no reply Catherine was not ill-pleased. While her shrewd common sense and strength of character held her back from the weakness of vanity and self-conceit, she was as susceptible to the admiration of men as most men are to the significance of a woman's eyes; and, as Breteuil had said, she was an adept in the art of comprehending the unspoken. With her temperament, and in her position, that was natural. It was not the first time that Saintonge had spoken in

some such strain, but never so publicly, nor with such meaning; nor did it escape her how deftly he had twisted the Princess Dashkova's raillery to convey that meaning.

"But this," said the Princess, "is not a question of opinion, but of fact. Monsieur Béranger and I differ. He says Her Majesty's eyes are brown, I say they are black. Will you decide for us? There are some we cannot trust!" and with a little grimace she looked round at the two Orloffs, who, with Ulrica Khitrovin, formed part of the group, but to one side and on its outer edge.

"If Madame gives me leave to satisfy myself, if that be possible."

"Do you mean to say you are uncertain, after all these months at Court? Oh! Monsieur de Saintonge, Monsieur de Saintonge! Is that your French gallantry!"

"He has been too busy looking elsewhere," said Alexius Orloff, laughing, and turning to Ulrica as he spoke. "What do you think, Mademoiselle?"

"I think that you all are dreadfully impertinent," she answered," and I wonder that even Her Majesty's good nature endures it."

"I know," said Gregory Orloff, speaking so low that only she and his brother could catch the words, "that had I been asked the colour of the sweetest eyes in the world, I could have told within an hour of seeing them that they were a charming grey."

"No doubt," she replied, "the Empress will be delighted to hear you say so!"

"Ah, Mademoiselle, why are you always so unkind?"

"Your pardon, Monsieur Orloff, but I wish to listen."

"To Saintonge? Then I hope what you hear pleases you; confound the fellow's impudence!"

"Have I leave to raise my eyes so high, Madame?" and Saintonge turned his back upon the group of three.

He must not only shut the door of hope, but lock it fast and fling the key away.

"There is no raising of eyes since you stand two feet above me," answered Catherine, looking him smilingly in the face. "Now, Monsieur de Saintonge, which are they, brown or black?"

"Neither, Madame, but a divine violet."

From behind Saintonge came the sound of the rustle of skirts, and Mademoiselle Khitrovin rose from her chair.

"Have I your Majesty's permission to retire?"

"No, Ulrica, child, no. Monsieur de Saintonge has played out his jest and I want you."

"Ah, Madame, no jest."

"Then the more shame to you, Monsieur de Saintonge. But we have talked folly long enough. Alexius, Ulrica, and you, Monsieur, I wish to consult you for a moment."

"And what are we to do?" asked the Princess.

"You? Oh, you can talk philosophy and brown eyes with Monsieur Béranger, though I think I know which subject he will prefer. Come, my children," and Catherine led the way to a corner of the room.

"Can I not take Alexius's place?" said Orloff, pushing himself forward, "I am quite sure my opinion is better than his, and he has work to do at the barracks."

"And have you no work to do at the barracks?" she answered significantly. "But for the present I want you to find out Roop, and tell him what almost happened this morning."

"He knows," said Saintonge; "I have just left him."

"Then, Gregory, hear what he advises. Oh, that we had another Kasbek!"

"Madam, believe me——" began Saintonge.

But Catherine cut him short with just such a gesture as if she brushed him aside. There is a time for all

things, and, as she had said, they had spoken folly long enough.

"Kasbek knew nothing of women's eyes, Monsieur de Saintonge," she retorted drily, "while you, it seems to me, know so much that you grow careless of what they have taught you."

Nor could Saintonge, with Ulrica Khitrovin following him three feet away, compel his tongue to an answer. It may be assumed that Gehazi, though the talents of silver were safely tucked away in the changes of raiment, shrunk on that first day of his doom from openly parading his sores.

But none the less Saintonge was determined that Catherine's well-meant scheme for drawing him closer to Ulrica Khitrovin should not succeed. It was not sufficient that he should close the door of hope upon himself; he must close it upon her also, and that he knew he so closed it embittered the bitterness beyond measure. In reply to a curt question asked an hour before he had said that sometimes he thought one thing, sometimes another; but that was to Breteuil. In the secret of his own heart he had little doubt. Not that he had so much as touched her fingers with his lips. There had been none of what the Empress in her blunt, coarse way had called philandering; whoever kissed Ulrica Khitrovin's hand with her heart's consent, might kiss her mouth, for there was no prudery in her self-respect. And yet Saintonge—now, if never before—knew the truth as certainly as if, with her arm about his neck and her mouth raised to his kiss, she had said, "I love you, dear!" And, knowing it, he turned to Catherine.

"May I speak of what we all know threatened you this morning?"

"Is that the explanation of your new mood, Monsieur de Saintonge?"

"No mood, Madame, but a revelation."

"Ulrica, child, Monsieur de Saintonge is talking mysteries, is he not?"

Then Saintonge closed the door and flung away the key.

"I think," he said icily, "Mademoiselle Khitrovin asked leave to retire."

An utter silence followed the deliberate words. Of the group of four Saintonge was the most self-possessed. Alexius Orloff stood two or three feet away in uneasy doubt whether or not he should intervene, and to what purpose. His sword, cards and dice he understood, and in the shock of a perilous emergency he was to show he could act promptly and with the wisdom of courage; but this play with a woman was too subtle. Ulrica Khitrovin had started a little, then stiffened, her face as white as the cambric she was unconsciously crushing in her hands. The Empress, of a different temperament, flushed redly, broad patches of colour flaming through the clear pallor of the cheeks, and her breathing deepened.

"Yes, go, child," she said, the gentleness of the voice a contrast to the stern harshness of the mouth. "And you, Alexius, do not forget there is work for you at the barracks. Now, Monsieur de Saintonge, what have you to say to me?"

In an embrasure at the opposite side of the room Ekaterina Dashkova stood whispering to the French attaché, and as the door closed behind Orloff the Princess laughed.

CHAPTER XXV

TANTET

NO doubt there were few who did not envy Paul de Saintonge as he chose the shaded side of the street when leaving the palace on that hot day. And why not ? Who could be happier than he ? Who more fortunate ? Whose heart could desire more than he possessed, or whose reputation overshadowed his ? In a city of gamblers he more than justified Laval's prediction, and had out-gamed the most desperate, winning or losing with the careless ease of the man who has no need to weigh debts or credits. Although avowedly attached to Catherine's party, he had dexterously maintained friendly relationships with the Czar, who looked upon him with a not unkindly contempt.

He had even, and quite recently, been admitted one of that select band who shared with Peter and his Holsteiners their private and very indiscreet revels at Oranienbaum. There, with courtier-like judiciousness, he had out-drunk the Czar, enough for good-fellowship, but not enough for victorious emulation, so that Peter declared him to be a good fellow—for a Frenchman. Nor did his honours end with the watered burgundy and a hoch ! hoch ! hoch ! for the King of Prussia. As the fun grew more furious and less discreet, he had been challenged to the honour of a cock-fight with his Sacred Majesty, in which Saintonge wisely suffered defeat, rolling upon the floor, while the Expression of God on earth hopped round him on one foot, crowing

shrilly in triumphant exultation, until he, too, lost his balance and they sprawled in company, an evident omen for the defeat of France. Surely social success could go no further? Though there were a few who, with shrewder foresight, grudged him yet more his forty minutes' confidences with the Empress, while Béranger and the Princess whispered at the other side of the room, out of earshot. Yes, surely he was one to be envied? Well, the heart knoweth its own bitterness.

But none of the bitterness showed itself outwardly, and not even Saintonge's concierge, skilled though he was in reading guilt on the face of innocence, saw deeper than the accustomed smile. Perhaps this was because his lodger had long since purged himself of doubt in the eyes of the police. Not even Von Korff could hold as suspect the man who had been butted by His Imperial Majesty's divine but shallow skull.

So with a "Pouf, Tsikler, my friend! but you make your Junes hot in Petersburg!" Saintonge passed upstairs to find himself clipped round the ribs by a pair of stout arms as he crossed his threshold. It was Tantet, his round face one smile from bald crown to chin-point.

"Oh! Monsieur Paul, Monsieur Paul, is it you at last? I thought you would never come! Thank heaven for one blessed sight in this devil of a country!"

"Tantet! You? How did you come here?"

"I bribed your watch-dog to say nothing about us. I—oh! I know I'm an old fool, but, Monsieur Paul, I just wanted to—to—surprise you, you know."

"And there is no doubt you have done it! But where is my uncle?"

"In there," said Tantet, with a grimace and a jerk of his head towards the inner room. "Sleeping, or if he is not sleeping he ought to be; and so I have you all to myself. I must make the most of my time before he wakes. Monsieur Paul, things are not going well."

"How can you say that, old friend, when you are here?"

"Monsieur Paul, it is all very well to laugh at my old foolishness, but a journey to St. Petersburg is no jest at our time of life. Three times Monsieur le Count nearly died on the way."

"Then why did he come?"

"Because," and Tantet rubbed his smooth chin, while a light, part humorous, part pathetic, broke across his chubby face, "because, Monsieur Paul, I could not come without him, and then latterly things were not going right. Something Monsieur de Choiseul said vexed him."

"Come now, Tantet, was it Choiseul or I?"

"Nothing you said, though you know, Monsieur Paul, you never wrote except when you wanted money."

"You don't know what the deuce of a lot of money a man spends in St. Petersburg!"

"He never grudged it to you," said Tantet eagerly. He was loyal to his master, though he did not love him as he loved his Monsieur Paul. "It was not that—not that at all. But the Duke wrote to him——"

"And who wrote to the Duke? Monsieur de Breteuil?"

"No, I think not."

"Who, then? Not Roop, my valet?"

"Well, Monsieur Paul," and this time Tantet's voice was distinctly apologetic. He was not in the least ashamed of prying for the benefit of his beloved Monsieur Paul, but was a little doubtful of Monsieur Paul's approval. "We have eyes, and how can we help seeing? If I had not seen and heard we would still be in Paris, and there would have been a new will."

"A new will, Tantet? Was it as bad as that?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

"Damn the scoundrel! And yet I knew he was nothing better than a spy. Tell me what happened."

"At first, Monsieur Paul, it was like death, the not hearing of you. I wonder why the good God gives us the power to love when it so often means the power to suffer? Then at last letters came; you had arrived, you were well, the ball was opened, and you wanted money. Also, Monsieur de Breteuil wrote, and I think this Roop. Of course they did not write direct to Monsieur le Count, but we heard of them through the Duke, and at the Duke's letters your uncle clucked his tongue and chuckled. The Lavals were never fools, he said, and Monsieur Paul was a Laval all through. Money? Of course you wanted money! To spend was the Laval way at your time of life; but what they spilt in youth they gathered in age, and all would come right in the end."

"Very right for me, with the King his heir!" said Saintonge drily. "Well, old friend, what next?"

"The wind changed, Monsieur Paul, and blew hot and blew cold. When Monsieur de Breteuil wrote it was the one, and when Roop wrote it was the other. But I always said that being a valet he lied by preference, and Monsieur de Laval grinned at me and told me no one should know better than I. But his letters had their effect on the Duke. A valet, he argued, would know more of his master's secrets than Monsieur de Breteuil could know, and of course, Monsieur Paul, he was right in that."

"Why did I not break his neck!" said Saintonge, and there was a grim earnestness in his voice which matched the words.

But Tantet shook his head.

"That is not the way to deal with such cattle. You should have been diplomatic. You should have found out what the Duke paid him, and bribed him higher with Monseigneur's own advances. That is diplomacy, Monsieur Paul. As it was he wrote—I did not see the letter but I saw the Duke's—he wrote

that you were allowing yourself to become entangled with some low woman——"

"Damn the liar!" cried Saintonge furiously. "Tantet, she is the sweetest——"

"Oh!" broke in Tantel ruefully. "So there is a woman after all? And I swore to the Count it was a valet's lie, top and bottom."

But Saintonge had recovered his self-control.

"No," he said curtly, "there is no one. You are quite right; there is no one."

Again Tantet shook his head.

"That won't do at all, Monsieur Paul. How can we both tell the Count the one story if I don't know the truth? Not, of course, that we need tell him the truth at all unless that serves you best. Surely you can trust old Tantet? If I have travelled all these weeks just to see your face and brush your clothes and be near you a little before I die, do you suppose I'll stick at a lie more or less for your sake? Not that I think a lie will help us much; there is always Roop to be reckoned with."

"We must keep him away from my uncle."

"Too late for that, Monsieur Paul. He was here when we arrived, and, though I did my best to prevent it, he had twenty minutes alone with my master."

"Then," said Saintonge grimly, "I don't think we are likely to see Monsieur Roop here again."

"No," replied Tantet, "I don't think we are; but the mischief is that the mischief's done already."

"I will find him," answered Saintonge, with a cold emphasis more threatening than any burst of passion; "and when I do he will find that a man may buy gold too dear, friend Tantet."

He set his teeth at his own phrase. Who should know the truth of the aphorism better than he, though now the talents of silver were dross and the changes of raiment moth-eaten? Perhaps it had been so also with Gehazi.

"So Breteuil wrote one thing, Roop another, and the valet prevailed over the ambassador! A pretty commentary on the value of ambassadors! Well?"

"Monsieur Paul, your uncle was furious. You know his way when his anger is deadly? Had you been there he would have sent you to the devil with a smile on his face and the bow of a Richelieu. He said there was some inferior woman——"

"Her family is as good as my own."

"As Laval? Your uncle would never believe that, Monsieur Paul. He would not believe it of the Angel Gabriel."

"And, Tantet, that is just what she is—an angel."

"Nonsense, Monsieur Paul; love will believe anything."

"Yes!" said Saintonge. "Love will even believe that such a useless fellow as Monsieur Paul is worth a journey to Russia."

"Ah! Monsieur Paul, Monsieur Paul, but that is different; you are different."

"Tantet, my friend, but for love we would be all much alike; thank God, love finds out the difference. Here is a verse I made—

'Sweet, you are sweet to me,
Not just because
Dear head to feet, in thee
Love finds no flaws.'

'That's but one page of truth,
Grey sky or blue;
All of it, age or youth
Is—you are you.'

You are you! There it is, Tantet."

"Yes," said Tantet in his turn, and he said it with a sigh. "You are Monsieur Paul, and there's an end of it."

"And, old friend, this worthless Monsieur Paul loves

you for your love, never doubt that," and laying his hand on Tantet's shoulder, Saintonge shook him gently. "Now let us come to the point, leaving the lady out of it all." The tender whimsical smile died out of Saintonge's face, leaving the eyes and mouth alike grave. "Believe me, she no longer is—is——But I need say no more."

"Not dead, Monsieur Paul?"

"No, no. Thank God, not dead."

"But she could never have refused——" began Tantet, his voice indignant at the very thought of such an impossibility. But Saintonge broke in upon him almost sternly; he could stand the galling of the sore no longer.

"Tantet, there is no more to be said. Let us go back to our point. My uncle grew furious, did he?"

"Yes, Monsieur Paul. For ten minutes he stood over the fire, talking to his will as if—as if—it had been you. You know his smooth way? The greater the anger the smoother the courtesy of voice, but the heart behind it is iron. For twenty generations Lavals of Saintonge had recognised their duty to Laval, and had done it. Then, and with a grave smile and a bow he shook the will in the air, there came a Laval who had failed; a Laval who did not understand that it was impossible to fail in such a trust as this, and be a Laval of Saintonge. For such a Laval there could be but one end; nor, let justice be done him, had he ever disguised what that end must be—it was this! But as he was about to push the will into the fire I caught his arm. Monsieur Paul, I do not know how I dared, and I thought he would have killed me. To you, even when he cut you off from Saintonge without a sou, he could smile and bow with the devil raging in his heart. You were still a Laval, and had a claim on his courtesy. But that I—Tantet—I, who came from the people and had only served him for three-and-forty years, should

dare to lay a finger upon him except in service, should dare to hold him back by force from a crime, was an infamy ! An infamy ! " repeated Tantet, almost crying. " When it was he who was the infamy, with all his pride and all his twenty generations. But, Monsieur Paul, the long and the short of it is that the will is not burnt, and we are here."

" How did you persuade him to come ? "

" First I told him Roop lied, and then I quoted your words the day you came from Versailles—his wise experience might turn failure to success. That tickled him, of course. What would a poor servant do if his master had no human weaknesses to tickle ! And again the long and the short of it is, we are here, though he nearly died on the road. Now, Monsieur Paul, what is our story to be ? "

" The truth, Tantet, and leave the telling to me. The sooner Monsieur de Laval hears it the better. How long is it since Roop left ? "

" Two hours, Monsieur. But is the truth wise ? These verses, for instance, are they to be repeated ? "

" The only answer to a half lie is the whole truth. See if Monsieur de Laval is awake."

Cautiously opening the door, Tantet stood for a moment half across the threshold, then beckoned to Saintonge. His mind was as a cord upon which two influences strained against each other—forty-three years of familiar intercourse against his love for Paul de Saintonge. Not that there was any real doubt as to the issue, or that love gave way an inch, but the pathetic figure on the bed was a heavy weight in the struggle.

Laval lay upon his side, his face turned half upwards. The cheeks, always thin, were haggard and wasted by fatigue and more than fatigue, the nose pinched at the nostrils, the temples hollowed, the eyes sunken, and through the general pallor of the aged face had crept a faintly livid tinge, new to Saintonge. The mouth was

closed, but above the firm chin the compressed lips showed in bluish lines. His grey hair, which he wore long, after a fashion of his own, had shaken loose from its ribbons and lay trailed in narrow wisps across the pillow. One hand lay flat upon the breast, above the riding-cloak which covered him, the typical Laval hand of which he was so proud, long and narrow, fine-boned but sinewy, the veins a violet tracery upon the whiteness of the smooth skin.

No wonder Tantet shook his head. When of the two Lavals but one was left, he who had made way for his successor would wear just such a look, for it seemed as if he were already dead. Then, as they waited, watching, the heavy grey lids were raised.

CHAPTER XXVI

"IT IS WAR!"

"TANTET, you may go."

"But I prefer that he should remain."

"You prefer? You!" Laval did not even move upon his pillow, but above the frailty of the flesh the dominant will flashed out in the cold contempt of the hard voice. "Tantet, leave the room. I do not wish a hired servant to hear my—my—disgrace."

"Remain, Tantet; to me you are a friend, and there is no disgrace. Or, if there is disgrace, it is, as Monsieur says, his own for giving an open ear to a renegade spy's lying hints. Servant, you say, Monsieur? Why did not you, who have such a nice sense of the family honour, turn out Roop, my valet, instead of listening to his servant's tales?"

By the help of an effort of his hand Laval sat upright, resting upon one elbow. With the other hand he brushed back the hair which the effort had flung across his face. The livid pallor had deepened to a flush intensified upon the cheek-bones, now so much more prominent than they had been six months before.

"You dare? You dare?" He spoke quietly, but the quiet was rather that of astonishment than from any self-control. "You—you—fool! Do you know I can make or break you? I can fling you to beg in the gutter? Aye! And I'll do it, too! I'll do it!"

"Why, Monsieur, if you please?"

"Why?" Swaying forward on his hips he turned

to Tantet, but pointing a shaking finger at Saintonge. "Do you hear him, Tantet? He asks why! Well, I'll tell him. Because you have failed, and I do not tolerate failures; because you have deceived me, and I cannot excuse deceit; because you have robbed me—robbed me—and I will not reward a thief; because you are about to disgrace your name, and I cast you off in anticipation; because you are a damned impertinent puppy and you know it. Are these whys enough for you?"

"Yes, Monsieur, if they were true, or any one of them."

"And I know them to be true, every one of them."

"You call it impertinence. When was I impertinent?"

"Three minutes since."

"I am as much a Laval as you, and it is our way to strike back when we are struck."

"Even at your uncle?"

"Since when have you discovered that you are my uncle?"

"Since you drew upon me through Breteuil and I honoured the drafts! Does that nick your thick skin, nephew Paul? If you can strike back I can riposte."

"I admit your generosity. If you had been one-fourth as generous at Versailles there would have been no need——"

"I do as I will with my own. So long as you wrought for France I grudged you nothing. Tantet, did I grudge him one single sou?"

"No, Monsieur, never."

"You hear? But now I'm done with you."

"Why?" asked Saintonge for the second time.

"Tantet, did you ever hear such a cool rascal?"

"I ask reasons and you give me abuse. With great respect, Monsieur, abuse proves nothing."

Pushing his elbows back, Laval lifted himself higher on the pillows. In spite of his anger he was impressed. He had looked for defence and here was attack, for excuses and here was justification; and though the

words at times had been bitter, there was a certain restrained dignity which was new in Saintonge. This was the Laval way, and it pleased him even while it offended.

"Proof?" he said at last. "What need have you for proof, you who know the truth?"

"Yes," answered Saintonge, "and what is the truth? I mean the truth of to-day and not of last week or last month. My valet, a paid spy, a renegade turncoat, with whom I shall deal later, has told you—what?"

"There is a woman——"

"There was a lady of whom I am not worthy."

"Was? Have you broken with the jade?"

"There was no tie to break; I have told you, I was not worthy of her."

"Piff!" and Laval blew out his lips in contempt. "Not worthy of her! Let us have no mock modesties, no calf-love sentiment, if you please."

"It was love, sneer as you will; and with such a mission of pretence as mine, how am I worthy the love of any good woman?"

"Your mission! Yes, but why don't you fulfil it?"

"It is just because I am fulfilling it that I say there was —was, I repeat, a lady of whom I am unworthy. All that is over. You see, I am frank and deny nothing. To me she was, she is, the Kingdom of Heaven upon earth. I reverence her as I would Mary. I love her as a man loves one woman once."

"Um! I said calf-love," answered Laval. "But Roop told me——"

"Oh, Monsieur!" broke in Tantet with contempt. "A valet! Who could believe him? Give him ten francs and he'll lie, give him a hundred and he'll sell his soul!"

"But there are more than Roop. Choiseul distinctly told me that the little German liked you well enough, and we know her type—a belle of Montmartre pitch-

forked into a palace. All was as easy as a cat lapping cream, and the scheme was a success. Did this liar of a valet tell the truth when he wrote that? He and Breteuil? Then, all of a sudden, you jibbed. I suppose it was because of this—this——"

"Courtesy, if you please, Monsieur."

"Damn the baggage! To spoil the prettiest plan ever devised! Come what may—understand me, Saintonge—I do not know what you are driving at, or what the end will be, but come what may, I'll have no foreigner, no Cossack barbarian, queening it at Laval."

"You need not be alarmed," answered Saintonge bitterly; "she would decline the dishonour."

"Dishonour? What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, Monsieur, that the better I fulfil my mission the greater its dishonour."

"Piff! Nonsense. If the King can do no wrong, neither can the Queen. What is sauce for the gander in Versailles is sauce for the goose in Petersburg! But are you fulfilling it? That is the point. Choiseul is furious; he says it is worse than failure, it is betrayal. You had shaken the tree, the fruit was loose, you had only to stretch out your hand, then——! It was the other woman, I suppose?"

"Once already I have told you all that is over."

"She refused you, did she? What is the hussy waiting for? A prince of the blood?"

"I never asked her. How could I, pledged as I am?"

"Devil take me if I understand you!" broke out Laval. "Tantet, what does the squeamish ass mean? Are you more pledged now than when you drew back your hand with the fruit ready to fall? If, for the sake of this—this—penniless paragon, this Kingdom of Heaven on earth—Lord! what a fool you are! If for her sake you forget your pledge, while you pick my pocket with both hands, and if the jade was not unkind, why the deuce do you come now with a long face and all

this solemn rant about your mission? Tell me plainly, tell me in a word, was Choiseul right or wrong?"

"He was right a month ago, but he is wrong to-day."

"Oh!" And again Laval pushed himself forward upon the bed. "Then you will succeed?"

"If success is possible, I shall succeed."

"Monsieur, Monsieur, did I not say so?" cried Tantet in triumph. "I knew that rascal of a Roop was a liar."

But Laval shook his head. Not that in the least he doubted Saintonge, but the pieces of the puzzle did not exactly fit.

"It was not altogether a lie; Monsieur Paul himself admits as much. Saintonge, why this weathercock change on your part? I have been young and know what love is. A man does not lightly give up the Kingdom of Heaven upon earth!"

Saintonge paused before replying, and when he spoke his voice was yet graver but less cold. Over both men an unconscious change had come, and anger had given place to argument.

"As you drove to-day through the streets of St. Petersburg from the Moscow gate, what did you see or hear?"

"Nothing! I was dead tired! How many weeks were we on the road, Tantet? What could I have seen or heard?"

"Listen, you who twenty years ago were at Prague with Belle-Isle."

The room was to the rear of the house, but the window, because of the oppressive heat, was thrown open to its widest extent. Through it there came a sound which never fails to thrill the nerves and set the heart a-throbbing, the sound of the rhythmic, heavy tramp of many feet marching in unison. Not was it alone. Blent with it rang another and sharper note, a note more like the common traffic of a great city intent upon its business, and yet with a subtle difference

which the trained ear caught and understood; it was the grating rasp of many horse-hoofs travelling at a foot's pace.

"Cavalry!" said Laval, and flinging back the cloak which covered him, he rose upon his knee that he might hear the better. And there was more to hear. Above the metallic hum there broke a heavier, more sullen roar, and again Saintonge made a gesture of silence. It was the grinding of weighted wheels swaying and jolting their load of cannon down the uneven, ill-kept street; then over all, far off, came the thin blare of a trumpet.

"War!" said Laval half under his breath. "My God! It is war!"

For once his flippant cynicism was flung aside, and his face, a mask of age, grew yet more haggard. Shut up in Prague with Marshal Belle-Isle he had heard these sinister voices too often to mistake their meaning or misread their message, nor were the horrors of the later mid-winter retreat to the Rhine forgettable.

"War," repeated Saintonge. "At Revel ten men-of-war are provisioned, manned, and ready; twice as many more are lying in Cronstadt roads. Chernuishef's army corps has already marched, two more wait their final orders; these are reinforcements."

"But it is against Denmark."

"Denmark first, then France. I have the Czar's own word for it."

"War!" repeated Laval, his voice a quaver. The vigour born of his passion had died away, and he looked at Saintonge helplessly. "Denmark first, then France? These devils of Cossacks, these devils of Cossacks! Paul, it can't be true; they have no quarrel with us."

"Prussia has, and if there is no quarrel as yet a pretext is soon found."

"Prussia too? These brutes of Brandenburg? It can't be true; Paul, it can't be true? These loose on France, these—these devils, these pitiless devils?"

"It is absolutely true, and it is all the Czar's doing. He is war-mad and Frederick is his god. Yesterday Breteuil demanded his passports, to-day the Empress was threatened with arrest; and yet I am told that to win her is our only hope and that I can do it. Now, Monsieur, you understand why I am what you call a weathercock."

"Aye, aye; what is a girl's face!" He spoke dully, almost as if he was too numbed for feeling. Then suddenly his passion flared out. "But why does not someone choke this mad dog of a Czar? You, Saintonge —anyone. There'll be no peace till it's done."

"Do you advise murder?"

"Murder? Piff! I told you once before, and I tell you again, you are too fond of big words." As suddenly as his passion rose it failed again; it was like the splutter of flame from burnt-out coals. "Tantet, where is my draught? Tronchin said I should take it at—at such times. Murder? Would you call it murder to poison a mad cur? Bah! It would be a good deed." Very wearily, and like a man whose strength is sapped to the utmost, he crawled back to the head of the bed and stretched himself flat, his head low upon the pillows. "Tantet, where is my draught? Um—um— I am as weak as a starved cat. Murder? You are too squeamish. Do you hear their feet? Tramp! tramp! tramp! That is war! I saw it in Prague, I saw it in the march back to the Rhine; villages ablaze, towns sacked, women—children—innocent women! God help the women, God help them! War! I saw it: four died out of every five. Devils of Cossacks, and God help the innocent women! Yet he calls it murder. Piff! What is one man's life? Tantet, I am tired, very tired, very tired."

"Come away, Monsieur Paul," whispered Tantet. "It is always so after the draught—always; and some day I think he will never awaken."

CHAPTER XXVII

SEMIRAMIS OR MESSALINA?

TO read the pulse of the nation is at once the ambition and the despair of statesmen. At rare intervals, and here and there, a physician of the body politic arises, who through his delicate sense of intuitive genius, comprehends the throb of the national heart, construes the beatings, and is master of the forces which make wild its blood. But in Russia there was no such seer. The word is used in the ancient sense—the sense of the man who perceives. That such a one should afterwards be called a prophet is an easy transition, since by virtue of his clear vision of the passing hour he foreknew what must follow in the hour to come.

Peter's narrow mind had certainly no such gift of perception. As in the days of Noah they ate, they drank, they married and were given in marriage, until the flood took them all away, so was it now with the Czar. He reviewed, he inspected, he feasted, he gamed, he insulted, he drank himself publicly drunk as was the prerogative of the Divine Emperor, nor dreamed that the tides of destruction were lapping the very lip of the rotten dyke which held them back. Of the throb of the nation's heart he heard nothing.

And yet, so far as the nation was concerned, these were days into which life, death, and the hereafter were packed. The life of many fevered emotions, the death of a tottering system which had outlived its use, and the hereafter of a vast development whose insatiable aggression still seeks after expansion.

Of these Petersburg gave conscious heed only to the first. Few men take long views of life, and as it is with the individual so it is with the mass; sufficient unto the day is the good or evil. And the city found its day good; gaiety was the dominant note. Even Peter himself, drunk with excitement and the anticipated glories of the campaign, found leisure for banquets, routs, and balls; each in turn affording him an opportunity to display a new uniform.

Of all these public festivals, whether held at Peterhof, Oranienbaum, or the capital, Catherine was a prominent figure, and where the Empress was there was Saintonge in close attendance. "I leave on the 25th," Breteuil had said. The days between were very few, but no man could have said that Saintonge wasted an hour of them. Even Laval was satisfied, and to soothe Laval's cynical discontent was not easy.

"Richelieu himself in his prime could not have done it better," said he. "And if all you appear to say isn't true, what does that matter so long as she believes you?"

"Yes," assented Saintonge, "but does she believe? There are times when I am not certain."

"Believe? Of course she believes! You are a confoundedly good-looking fellow, Saintonge, and is she not ten years older than you! She believes, because she wants to believe."

In the ball of the twenty-fourth of June, the splendour of the festivities reached a culminating point. That Peter's weak, excited brain should drive him to extremes was natural. The buffoon of the barrack-room, drinking himself drunk with his familiar cronies, became by a shift of mood the Divine Emperor, in whose honour no magnificence could be too superb, nor was any expenditure an extravagance. By his order the city had been illuminated for three nights, each night of glory and glitter more splendid than the last. That was the spectacle of the people, now

came the turn of the Court, and the entire of the enormous palace was thrown open to a gathering of notables such as St. Petersburg had never before seen.

" My faith ! " said Laval, as he entered the reception-room with Saintonge, " When we grow poor in Paris we shall know where to come a-borrowing ! But the taste is execrable, simply execrable ; too much light, too much colour, too much tinsel and gold braid. There is no restraint anywhere, absolutely none. But it is Russian ! Russian all over and very barbaric. Look at the Czar, strutting like a conscious peacock with its tail spread. He will turn round in a minute to let us see the pearls embroidered on his coat-tails ! I am sure he has pearls sewn on that brocaded satin, probably also diamonds and rubies. Bah ! With us a newly appointed farmer of taxes would know better. Then, look at that handsome brute Orloff. I declare he is making love in a ballroom as hotly as if there was none but the moon to look on ! See how he leers, how he ogles, how he whispers in her ear ; no ! no restraint anywhere."

" Is it Mademoiselle Khitrovin's fault that the man is insufferable ? "

" Um ! Mademoiselle Khitrovin ? The jade is attractive enough. Her paleness looks interesting and her eyes are big. Perhaps that is because of the dark shadows under them." Pausing, he inhaled a pinch of snuff with slow deliberation, his little finger delicately crooked upward, then brushing the dust from his laces he tapped Saintonge on the arm. " It was always impossible—always unthinkable. I would never have consented, never, never. And you might have made a fool of yourself. Really, Saintonge, you owe the Empress a debt."

" Unthinkable or not, all that is past," answered Saintonge curtly.

" Still, that it was impossible is surely a consola-

tion ? Wise men do not cry for the moon, they reach out instead and take what is within arm's length. It is the unattained possible which leaves the heart hungry—the earthly will-o'-the wisp, the star which is always just beyond the finger-tips. Here comes Vorontsof. While I divert his attention do you go to your little German, and don't forget that Breteuil leaves Petersburg to-morrow. Ah, Chancellor, Chancellor, I have been young and now am old, yet never have I imagined a scene of such subtle beauty delicately expressed," and the cynical old hypocrite offered his snuff-box with a flourish.

With murder, rage, and bitter despair in his heart, Saintonge bowed smilingly to Orloff and Ulrica Khitrovin as he passed on to where Catherine obviously waited for him. He could close the door on love and hope because he conceived that to be his duty, but that he might leave the woman of his worship at the mercy of Gregory Orloff had not entered his calculations. And yet his lips rested longer on Catherine's hand than etiquette required, just as, when he raised his head, her fingers lingered a few seconds on his wrist and were withdrawn, he thought, with reluctance.

"You are late, Monsieur de Saintonge."

"And have been punished, Madame, by the loss of an hour of life."

"And life," she answered, "may be so short that surely we should fill its every hour to the full."

"True, Madame, and yet no man can fill his own life, that blessing must be the work of another."

"Work, Monsieur ? Fie, that is not a pretty way of putting it."

"Then shall I say it is play to you ? "

Never had he seen the Empress look more handsome, more womanly. The clear white of face, neck, and bosom was delicately touched by an uncommon flush which grew or softened with her changing emotions ;

into her eyes had swept a depth of colour which lent their charm both brilliance and significance, the harsh, tense lines had passed from the mouth, leaving the lips full and soft as a girl's. For once she had cast away both dread and watchfulness, losing with them that masculine hardness which had repelled him the first time he had seen her, and, more potent than all, in its place there was a gentle kindliness almost as expressive as a caress. What women cannot say of love without speaking has yet to be discovered. Yet, at the moment he hated her, for, six feet away, Ulrica Khitrovin turned her back upon him, and turning, turned herself to Orloff.

But he must have played his part well. Breteuil had told him that Catherine was an adept in the art of understanding unspoken language, and the kindly eyes smiling into his smiled on. Nor did she reply in words to his question.

"Come," she said, laying her finger-tips within his arm. "Let us see if Monsieur de Breteuil can give a good account of us in Paris. Ulrica, child, Monsieur Orloff will take care of you. I leave you in his charge."

"Monsieur de Breteuil ?" answered Saintonge, with one backward glance at Ulrica Khitrovin before they crossed the room slowly; "but, Madame, you surely know that Monsieur de Breteuil is not here ?"

"No !" and it might have been in simple courtesy that she looked up at him as she spoke, though to Saintonge there seemed something deeper than courtesy in the glance; "but you will see him before he goes, will you not ?" At the door the Princess Dashkova, accompanied by Alexius Orloff, met them, and Catherine paused. "Everything goes well, I think ? No, you need not attend me, I am taking Monsieur de Saintonge a tour of the rooms. He is to tell me what he thinks of everything, and will speak more frankly if we are alone. I hope he will be a friendly critic, for I would not have Monsieur de Breteuil laugh at us in Paris."

"There will be no laughter, Madame," answered the Princess, more gravely than was her wont; "or, if they laugh, they will laugh with us and not at us."

"Perhaps they will not laugh! Where have you spent your day, Monsieur Orloff?"

"At the Ismailofski barracks, Madame."

"Yes?" It was a question sharply put, not a mere assent. Catherine's eyes grew suddenly alert, and the fingers laid on Saintonge's arm contracted with a spasm as she asked it.

"Yes," replied Orloff. But though he said no more than the one word, it had all the emphasis of a strong affirmative.

"Ah!" It seemed a sigh of relief. "Monsieur de Saintonge, we will move on, if you please."

"The Ismailofski barracks?" said Saintonge, striving after the gentle art of polite conversation. "They are on the Peterhof road, are they not?"

"Yes," she replied, "at Kalenkina, and when the Czar leaves for Oranienbaum I go to Peterhof."

Saintonge was at a loss for an answer. Both words and manner perplexed him. He could see no sequence of ideas which justified the conjunction, and yet in her mind there was evidently a connection which affected her deeply. She walked very erect, and a stern, masculine gravity had ousted the soft, womanly gaiety of a few minutes before. It was as if sunlit water had been wrinkled by a clouded blast from the east, blurring the image of a summer peace. There was a challenge in her eyes, a look new to Saintonge, and, as though to accept it, the Czar met them face to face.

Though the night was yet young, Peter had been drinking heavily, His face was already fiery red, his narrow eyes glazed and shining. With one hand he gesticulated violently as he talked, the other clung to Elizabeth Vorontsof for support. He was, as Laval had hinted, magnificently dressed, his pinched chest

packed with the stars and crosses of a dozen famous orders, flashing their blue and red sparks as he lurched in his walk. Behind him was a boisterous group of officers and diplomats, all vying with one another to out-Czar the Czar.

To Saintonge's profound bow he returned a friendly gesture of the hand, as of one good comrade greeting another; then, swaying from his loosened knees, he turned abruptly to Catherine with a scowl on his face.

"Where—where are your women? I have——" and he jerked an arm backwards, "I have my staff—a Czar should have his staff."

"Yes, Sire," replied Catherine, her eyes on Elizabeth Vorontsof, "and I see your Majesty leans upon it."

"Eh? What is that? I'll have no airs, no rudeness; no, by God! I won't! No confounded superiority, d'you hear! I say I have my staff. The dignity——" he paused, straightened his meagre figure, and passed his hand nervously over the jewels on his breast; then he went on, forcing his tongue to obedience, "the dignity of the Emperor requires a staff to keep up the dignity of the Emperor."

"I admit, your Majesty, that a something is required."

"Then why have you not your women? Saintonge is all right. He is a good fellow and all right, though I don't like Frenchmen. I say, Saintonge," and Peter suddenly broke into an open-mouthed laugh, "you remember that night at Oranienbaum? That night after supper? My faith! But you went down like a ninepin, big as you are! Up Russia and down France! Ha! ha! ha!" and he slapped his thigh. "Yes, yes, Saintonge is all right, but—what was I saying? Oh, yes!—no! that wasn't it. No matter, it will do. Madame Resource, here's a nut for you to crack. I've named my uncle George regent while I'm away. He'll do all right. My family aren't fools! My word! No!

They only marry them." Again he laughed, his hand mechanically tightening on Elizabeth's arm lest he should fall.

Catherine ignored the insult, nor, this time, were there any tears. The time for passivity and the defence of tears had passed. She even smiled a little. Then her gaze left Peter's flushed face as he jeered in the triumph of his latest folly, and swept the now silent group behind him. Once—twice—it passed from face to face in both challenge and appeal, then back again to the Czar. At Elizabeth Vorontsof she never so much as glanced.

"I have no doubt His Highness will maintain your Majesty's reputation," she said quietly. "And what is your will for me?"

"Eh? You? Do you think I have time for trifles when I am so busy? Gentlemen, let us go to the card-room." But as he passed Catherine he turned. One of his brilliant jests had just struck him. "My will for you? Yes, yes, you are the Empress and have a right to know," he said, his shrill, hard voice sounding to every corner of the room. "I will give you a choice of palaces. You can have which you please—Schlusselburg or St. Peter and St. Paul! ho! ho! ho!"

A little sibilant indrawing of breath swept across the group surrounding the Czar, but though the colour mounted to her face in a flood, Catherine made no reply. Her touch upon Saintonge's arm had again tightened, and this time it was he who said, "Let us move on." In these few minutes his task had grown easier. With his nerves tingling, his blood at fever point from rage and tumultuous indignation, there would be no need to simulate a lying passion. To protest devotion to a woman so publicly, so gratuitously insulted could not be difficult. All he had to do was to let the warm heart of his generous manhood speak for itself.

"Madame," he whispered, bending to her ear as they passed on, his voice vibrating in the intensity of his suppressed wrath, "I know not what to say, or, rather, I know not how to say it; least of all can I say it here. May I—I know it is bold, bold to desperation, so bold that unless you take pity upon me there can be no forgiveness—may I beg leave for an opportunity—alone—not with—with the Empress, but with the woman who—who—is so dear to all our hearts?"

His thought stumbled, and so was less outspoken and clear in its conclusion than he had intended. Even his rage found it impossible to speak the lie direct, and so slid off upon an inference, trusting to her discernment. Nor was he disappointed.

"To all our hearts, especially to the Czar's," said Catherine, looking up at him. But though, so far, her words were bitter, her eyes had again grown kindlier and the stern mouth more gentle. "Yes, Monsieur de Saintonge, you can have your opportunity. You are with me now that you may have it."

What opening could be better, and yet Saintonge was silent. Back to his memory came a sentence spoken by Breteuil the first day they had met. "Some call her the new Messalina, but to me she is a Semiramis in the making." Was she both? Her shrewd insight, her quickness of mind, the courage with which she confronted the threatening, irresponsible power of the Czar and outfaced the danger, pointed to the one. But now this deliberate forethought, and all it stood for in its almost avowed intention, chilled his warm blood. A noble fool might lay down his life for the Semiramis, but there was little nobility in the fool who sacrificed more than life for a willing Messalina, who had never stirred his passion.

CHAPTER XXVIII

HOW A MAN MAY LOSE AND YET WIN

"WE go this way," said Catherine, and Saintonge found himself in a room of the palace which was strange to him.

It was laid out with three or four tables on which were packs of cards, and little piles of counters for campis; a lamp hung from the centre of the florid ceiling, and the further end was entirely screened by a line of palms and flowering shrubs, flanked by heavy curtains. Slipping her hand from Saintonge's arm, Catherine walked forward alone and stood by the table, her back turned towards him.

For a moment neither spoke; then—

"Well, Monsieur?" she said softly.

"Madame, all my sympathies——"

"Sympathies are cold comfort to a woman, Monsieur de Saintonge."

"Then, Madame, all a man dare offer. Such an insult, such a threat from the Czar——"

But again she interrupted him, and as she half turned towards him, he saw that she was smiling.

"Oh, Monsieur, if you are going to talk politics, this is much too public a place. We must go a little further, where we can be quite safe from interruption." Drawing aside a curtain she left a way for him to pass, then let it fall behind them. "An Empress, God help her! is not as other women. Now, Monsieur de Saintonge, that we are really alone, what have you to say to

me? The Empress gives you leave to speak to the woman."

They were in a deep alcove, furnished with three or four brocaded chairs. A door on the right gave exit, but where it led Saintonge could not guess; no doubt it was to some place of safety. So effectually did the screen of palms shut out the light, that they were two shadows alone in a little world of shadows. That all had been deliberately prepared he had no doubt; the solitude, the dimness, the way of retreat in case of interruption were proof on proof.

"Breteuil was wrong. It is Messalina," said Saintonge in his heart, and because of the thought he was silent.

"Well, Monsieur, well?"

He could not see Catherine's face, but the voice was impatient.

"It is so hard to speak when the heart is full, and if the Empress is not as other women, other women are not as the Empress. There is none like her, and how can I speak? How can I dare risk offence? How can I dare to put in words all that—that—my heart would bid me say? For five months I have struggled to—to—control, to—to—subdue, that which has become too strong for me, and now what is there left but that perhaps pity may—may—be shown even to one unworthy? But how could one—any man, be fully worthy of such a blessing? Madame—my Queen——"

"Hush!" she said softly, laying her hand upon his arm as he knelt before her chair. "Hush! Who are these in the outer room?"

With a sudden and acute sense of relief Saintonge rose to his feet. However dangerous the interruption it was welcome; and the danger was unmistakable. He had never disguised from himself that the comedy he played might cross the edge of tragedy at any moment. Peter would willingly seize on any pretext to destroy

Catherine. If through Saintonge he found that pretext, then was Saintonge doomed hopelessly, since only his death could justify to the world at large the destruction of the Empress. With a silent jerk he loosened his light court blade in its sheath. His mind was made up ; there would be no wheel, no hanging, no mutilations, not even Siberia.

But the first glance between the interwoven leaves brushed that thought aside, and though he still held his grip upon the hilt he set his teeth with a groan. There were two in the room beyond, a man and a woman, Gregory Orloff and Ulrica Khitrovin. Her face was turned towards them, and through the pallor noted by Laval, a pallor which told of sleepless nights, much silent suffering and a tired spirit, angry spots glowed redly upon her cheeks.

" You said the Empress was here, Monsieur Orloff. Why do you lie to me ? "

As she spoke she emphasised the passion in her voice with such a sharp movement that her fan was jerked from her hold, and fell with a little clash at Orloff's feet. Stooping, he picked it up, kissed it on both sides and handed it back with a bow.

" Not so sweet a privilege as at Dolgoburg," he said, " and in turn Dolgoburg was not so sweet as—the sweetest lips in all Petersburg. Mademoiselle, surely you have protested long enough for prudery ; now that we are alone let us be happy together."

For a moment she stood looking full in his handsome, mocking face, then with a quick gesture she snapped the fan across and dashed it upon the floor.

" Oh ! You are vile—vile ! " she cried, and swaying herself clear of his grasp with a swift twist of her supple body she ran from the room.

" Damn the vixen ! " said Orloff, as with a shrug of the shoulders he followed her leisurely. " Some fruit

ripens slowly; she will be kinder another time, or if not, so much the worse for her."

With a deep unconscious breath Saintonge shot back the half-drawn blade to its sheath and turned to Catherine. The Empress had risen, and now that his sight had grown accustomed to the dimness, he could see that her eyes were wet, and the firm mouth tremulous for once. The brief scene had moved her deeply, and in a flash he understood that Orloff's treachery was his opportunity, if only he could keep the anger and self-contempt from his voice. But Catherine anticipated him.

"Loyal!" she said. "Loyal to the very core."

"Oh, Madame," began Saintonge, seizing gratefully upon the thought, "who would not be devoted to such a mistress? Who would not be loyal in love and service——"

But sweeping aside the curtain she cut short his rhapsodies without ceremony, and passed into the outer room.

"Silence, Monsieur de Saintonge. Are you so coarse in palate that you cannot taste this loyalty? So blind that you cannot see that this is more than the loyalty of a subject to the Empress, or of a woman to a woman? Must I tell you that it is the loyalty of a woman to a man—a man, God knows, but little worth such loyalty. And yet——" The passion vibrating through her voice softened as she paused, searching his face keenly in the full light; "and yet, perhaps not altogether worthless. Monsieur de Saintonge, Monsieur de Saintonge, hers is a heart of gold. Of gold? That is a vile phrase, for gold can be bought, but never such a heart as hers. For months I have sifted it through and through, have watched, have tested—proved, and with her it is not as with these others." She named no names, but with a sweep of her arm Catherine seemed to draw the whole Court into the scope of her scornful

condemnation. "These! We know their little lives, their mean desires, their petty schemings, their plottings for themselves, their gross ambitions. These! If they are loyal at all it is to their own gain or the vile passion of the moment. But she? With her it is the loyalty of a lifetime. Who is the man, Monsieur de Saintonge? Who is he? Tell me?"

"Madame," answered Saintonge, "I have nothing to say." His mouth was firm set, his eyes hard and stern that they might not show their pain, his face as white and haggard for the moment as Ulrica's own. It was with difficulty he could command his voice to speak at all.

"Nothing to say?" echoed Catherine harshly. "And I called him not altogether worthless? Was that a lie? Have I judged so badly, I who think I know men? Or can it be that he is so foolish as to snatch at what is beyond him, at what he does not want and could never reach, and so snatching, lose such loyalty? Just now," and she pointed to the alcove, "I tested you there, and you rang false. Am I such a milk-maiden that I do not understand when a man has his heart in his words? I say you rang false. For whom are you true, Monsieur de Saintonge, and was your falsehood not the echo of that truth? For days you have played a comedy of pretence. What was behind the mask? I remember the day it began; it was the day the Czar threatened me with arrest. Here, said I, is a chivalrous gentleman. But presently there came a subtle offence through the chivalry, and I knew you played a comedy. Why did you play it, Monsieur de Saintonge?"

"Madame, I have been a fool and have failed; give the fool leave to go."

"Unpunished? Oh, no! Your punishment is confession. Besides, the comedy is not played out. Come, Monsieur, confess. Why have you played such a part?"

"Madame, my country is in danger, and those who know best tell me that you alone can save her."

"Monsieur, you do the Empress much honour and the woman but little! Now, answer me again frankly: what was behind the mask?"

"A very bitter and ashamed heart, Madame, and much love for Mademoiselle Khitrovin."

"And yet you had the audacious impudence to make pretence to me! Upon my word, Monsieur de Saintonge, you are a very bold man."

"Madame, Madame, the fool has confessed land is punished. For God's sake let the fool go!"

"And lose the fruit of your labour? Then the fool would be a fool indeed, instead of a very impudent Don Quixote." She paused, looking aside in deep thought, then went on gravely. "Monsieur de Saintonge, be as loyal and devoted to the Empress as you have pretended devotion to the woman, counting the cost to yourself as little as you counted it to-night, then come at the end of a month, and I will tell you France is my friend."

"Madame, Madame, is it a promise?"

For answer Catherine held out her hand, and going down upon one knee Saintonge kissed it; nor, this time, did he linger over the ceremony.

"And am I—can I be—forgiven?"

"Rise, if you please. Forgiven?" Her eyes searched him quizzically. "You ask a hard thing. You tell a woman she is not the very dearest, the very sweetest, the most to be desired in the whole world, and yet expect to be forgiven." Stooping, Catherine lifted the broken fan from where Ulrica had flung it in her contempt, and turned it in her hands. "But I do not say no. I think we women forgive all our life long; and is there not another whose cause for offence is deeper than mine? If she can forgive you, surely I may. Remain here and keep her fan till she comes; perhaps she will receive

it back from you, though you do not deserve it. And—yes, you may tell Monsieur de Breteuil that the other is a promise."

She was gone while she spoke, leaving Saintonge standing by the table with the broken fan in his hand. The impossible, the inconceivable, had come to pass. That much he understood, but details, consequences, effects—these failed him. They were as elusive as spilt mercury, and his confused brain could, for the moment, no more pick up their thread than a man can grasp the shining globules between his coarse finger and thumb.

Breteuil? He might tell Breteuil? What did that mean? That the Empress knew—had known all along, and had played with him? What matter if she had! He had won, though the victory was none of his. But what had he won? As he forced himself to think, his mind grew clearer, and thoughts are like links of a chain—each is detached, but each leads on and on and on. He had won her promise, he might tell Breteuil! He had won what he had come to St. Petersburg to win. Not by Choiseul's road, perhaps, but by a road which left him free to win—Ulrica! Yes; free to win, but would she now be won? Could he dare to hope it was still possible? What was it the Empress had said? The loyalty of the woman to a man—of a woman to a man! God in heaven! Who was he to be worthy of such a loyalty? Very reverently he bent and kissed the broken sticks of the fan, and as he kissed them he remembered Laval's dogged pronouncement. He had won, but there would be no Shoes of Gold. No Shoes of Gold? Saintonge and Laval must go? So let it be! Again he kissed the broken fan, and when he raised his head Ulrica Khitrovin was standing in the doorway.

"Her Majesty bade me——" The colour ran red in her cheeks as she paused, stammering, "bade me fetch my fan."

For the third time Saintonge touched it with his lips, but this time his eyes were on hers to plead for him.

"Mademoiselle, is there any hope that you will accept it from my hand, disloyal though I have been?"

"Who called you disloyal? Where no allegiance is claimed, Monsieur, there can be no disloyalty." Even as she spoke the flush faded, and her voice was as cold as her words.

"Not claimed, but compelled," he answered. "I could not help loving you."

Up rose the tide of colour afresh. One open hand touched her side for an instant to bid her heart beat quietly lest it should betray her, then the arm dropped, and she shivered a little as if chilled. But there was no change in the indifferent level of the voice.

"Never compelled; never that. But there was a time when I thought—when I believed——" Though there was no falter she paused a moment, then went on bravely: "believed it was true when you said you were not as Orloff. I suppose the Monsieur Orloffs of the world have different methods. But—I may admit it now—I believed something more than that, something you taught me to believe. At times it is easy to believe a lie."

"God's truth and no lie," he said, and said it very soberly.

"If God's truth, then man's lie at the last," she retorted.

"God's truth," he persisted, drawing nearer to her, his voice rising passionately. "And never truer than when I shut love out of my life. No! Never out of my life, never, never. How could I, when it was my life? Ever since Dolgoburg you have been what you are to-day—the one woman in the world to me; always the one woman of my love and reverence, even when I shut out hope and earned your contempt, because I thought that my duty."

"Your duty? How could that be?"

"Love of mine, do not ask. I cannot bear to shame myself in your dear eyes."

"When I remember Dolgoburg I do not think there can be shame," she answered softly.

"Oh!" he cried. "I think God lets a good woman love a man that her trust may save him from himself. Ulrica, Ulrica, for the loss of your love I have walked in hell all these weeks!"

"But it was never lost," she answered; "and, oh, Paul, where have I not walked!"

"Beloved, am I forgiven?"

"In love there is no forgiveness," she said softly, "and the seeming lie is a truth. Love that is too high for offence has nothing to forgive."

"Ah! love of mine, life of mine, how can they ever say there was a love passing the love of women?" Stooping, he held her to him, lifting her face to his, and kissed her, first on the forehead, gently, tenderly, reverently, then with all the full passion of a man upon the mouth.

It is not only in the world to come that there is a gulf fixed between despair and love realised, but in this life it may be crossed at a word. And it was really very thoughtful of the Empress to have provided a room so free from interruption.

"I have to leave a message with Breteuil," said Saintonge, as he drove from the palace with Laval through the fresh glory of the June morning.

"You seem very jubilant. What is the message, if the question is not indiscreet?"

"Not at all indiscreet, and I have a right to be jubilant; he is to tell Choiseul that I have earned my wages."

But Laval shook his head. The night had wearied him, and in the strong searching light of the late dawn he looked aged beyond even his long tale of years.

"There is no earning of wages until they are paid,"

he said, "and there is no paying possible while that God-upon-earth turned mountebank is alive. To-night I heard him talk, and I am horribly afraid. If ever you get him down, crush him, Paul, crush him so that there will be no rising again." And when the Count de Laval called his nephew by his Christian name he was in deadly earnest.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE PRICE OF THE GOLDEN SHOES

"I AM too old to go Court-hunting," said Laval. "I and Tantet will stay where we are while youth goes the way of youth."

He spoke captiously, querulously. The double fires —the heat of a Russian summer and his consuming dread of Peter—had of late preyed alike upon Laval's strength and temper.

"The Empress is at Peterhof," said Saintonge, replying to the innuendo rather than to the words themselves.

"And more than the Empress! What is this I hear of your hanging day after day about the skirts of that—that girl?"

"Oh! You have been talking to my late valet, I suppose? He shows his caution by keeping out of my way."

"No, puppy, I have not. But I tell you flatly, Saintonge, I do not like your behaviour."

"Monsieur de Breteuil expressed himself as perfectly satisfied."

"Breteuil left Russia a fortnight ago; and besides, what is Breteuil's satisfaction to me?"

"You are hard to please," answered Saintonge, with a shrug of his shoulders. "I came to Petersburg to satisfy Breteuil; Breteuil is satisfied, and yet you are not content. You know I have the promise of the Empress."

"Yes, at the end of another fortnight? Well, at the end of that fortnight we shall leave Petersburg, you and I."

As once before Saintonge had stared out of window, shaking his head in answer to Chauvelin's appeal, so was it now. The view was very different. Then it had been a grey winter's sky, and a frozen courtyard whose walls cramped life like a prison. Now July was in its youth, the Neva flamed and glittered as if all the suns in heaven were broken to innumerable shining fragments and strewn in glory upon its surface, even the grim prison-house of St. Peter and St. Paul had smoothed its frown. It was like his life, thought Saintonge, the winter of his discontent made glorious summer by the sun of Love.

"Well, why don't you answer?"

"I am sorry," and as Saintonge spoke he turned to face Laval, "but I do not think Mademoiselle Khitrovin could be ready in a fortnight."

"Then you really are going to play the fool?"

"No! At one time that was true, but not now."

"Piff! A fool of fools, and you think to hide your folly under a sham sentiment! Not now! says my lord the fool! But it is now, for my mind is made up and I never change. There is never room for more than one Laval will at a time, and I'll have no Cossack barbarians at Saintonge, whether I'm living or dead. I like my blood as I like my linen—clean. There! there! It's no use flying into a passion; anger never yet made a fool wise. I give you fifteen days to think it over. Tantet! Tantet! Where the deuce—oh, Tantet, I am leaving Petersburg in fifteen days."

"And Monsieur Paul?"

"Monsieur Paul is considering whether or not he will remain a fool. Saintonge, you have eaten both the swine's husks and the honey and milk of life; make your choice between them."

"Is that really your last word, sir, and is it just?"

"Why try to argue? From the first you knew my mind was made up, and I never change."

"For myself I do not care, but——"

Laval stopped him with a characteristic wave of the hand.

"It is for yourself you do care! What is this which you call love but pure selfishness? I am nothing, Laval is nothing, you are everything! Well, take your everything, but consider the cost."

"I have nothing to consider," answered Saintonge; and if Laval looked for a further outburst of passion or protest he was disappointed. Saintonge's voice was as level as his own. "Tantet, my friend, will you order my horse? I am expected at Peterhof this afternoon."

"Don't go, Monsieur Paul. When he talks like that, he is a—a—mule; there's no moving him. You may scowl at me, Monsieur, but it is the truth. There is some woman in this, and all Saintonge and Laval are at stake. She's not worth it, Monsieur Paul; she can't be."

"She is worth ten Lavals," answered Saintonge. "But as it happens it is the Empress who expects me."

"If you have finished criticising your master," said Laval, "will you be so good as to leave the room and order your fool of a Monsieur Paul's horse. But I am a man of my word, Saintonge; I said I would give you fifteen days, and so I will. After that——" Another expressive wave of the hand completed the sentence.

"Do not let us part in anger," began Saintonge as Tantet left the room, shaking his bald head sorrowfully. Monsieur Paul might say what he liked, but no woman could be worth such a loss. "We are alone in the world——"

"No! no!" interrupted Laval, flicking some specks of dust from his knee delicately with his handkerchief. "Let us be exact. I will be alone, but not you; you will always have your Cossack barbarian."

"Of our race you and I are left alone."

"No sentiment, I beg. As to parting in anger, I cannot afford to be angry; my heart won't stand it. Tronchin warned me to be careful. Nor are we parting. Surely you will come and say good-bye fifteen days hence? Tantet would be vexed if you did not."

"Uncle, I love Ulrica——"

"And very satisfying you will find it, I am sure."

"—as I never thought a man could love a woman," went on Saintonge as if the interruption had never been made. "Through her I have learned that in love there is no sacrifice—no such thing as giving up."

"Um!" broke in Laval. "There will be some giving up fifteen days hence. I suppose that is your horse I hear. I am afraid you will have a hot ride. Commend me to your friend the little German."

With a nod he turned to the window, but as Saintonge reached the door Laval suddenly swung round in his chair. His pale worn face was suffused with colour, and the tired eyes gleamed under the drawn brows.

"Paul, for one thing I could forgive you; for one thing I could say, 'Take the jade and be a fool your own way.' That hare-brained imbecile of an impossible Czar haunts me. Every time we meet he smiles and chuckles and prattles of Paris—of Paris. If he grows so easily drunk on wine, blood will madden him and there will be no limit to his wantonness—he, and his brutes of Cossacks. Rid us of him, Paul, rid us of him for ever; somehow, anyhow, who cares what the means may be, and—and—you may have your barbarian! But I forgot; you have scruples, or think you have. No, do not answer me; what I have said I have said. May I trouble you to close the door behind you? Even in summer I do not like a draught."

It is to be noted that this time Saintonge did not retort, "Do you advise murder?" Through the long ride to Peterhof the question rather was, "Had he scruples at all, or had Laval touched the truth with

a shrewd finger when in bitter sarcasm he added, 'You think you have'?"

To our easily swayed minds, reiteration often has the force of evidence. That is the well-known principle which governs successful advertisement—repeat a statement often enough, insistently often, and you will be believed in the end, or at least you will excite sufficient faith to test the truth of the statement. And through the past month Laval had never wearied in his reiterations; the words might vary, but the thought was always the same. After Denmark—France! The Empress may promise, but what power has Catherine? The Czar is the Czar. Set a man's life in one scale and a nation's misery in the other—which weighs the heavier? After all, Paul, what is it? One drunken, half-mad buffoon the less! These, and many more were his arguments. Under such reiterations had his scruples weakened? Had they even disappeared altogether? That was the question. Nor had he found an answer when he gave his horse into Dmitry's hands at the end of his twenty-mile journey.

Probably no definite answer, no actual yes or no, was possible. It was true he could not do what Alexius Orloff had done in the snow on the night of Vorontsof's supper; but short of that—no, he could not tell. And yet, surely in that very uncertainty he had answered the question? If the woman who hesitates is lost, the man who deliberates upon scruples has already consented.

But if Saintonge was expected by Catherine, it was Ulrica Khitrovin who received him; nor did he see the Empress at all that day.

"Paul, there is something wrong. Yes, you may kiss me just once, but after that you must listen; and how can you listen if I cannot speak? Please, dear, I am serious. Of course, they do not tell me their secrets, but I can see for myself; there is something very far wrong."

"And yet who can keep a secret like you! There was one, the very sweetest in the world, which I tried to guess for months, but you hid it from me, so that to the last I went in doubt. And perhaps this time there is no secret at all?"

"There is a secret of fear if there is nothing else," she answered soberly, refusing to be drawn down that primrose path which leads so pleasantly to the Lovers' Way.

"Why so?"

"Do you think I have no eyes?"

"I think you have the most beautiful eyes in the world."

"And yet they are not a divine violet!" she answered mischievously.

"Dear, did we not agree to forget all that?"

"And yet you refuse to take me seriously."

"I would to God I could take you at once and for altogether," he replied with sudden gravity; "for I, too, am afraid. Tell me what these dear eyes see."

"Everywhere there is uneasiness and a watchful unrest which is almost alarm. Two days ago a messenger came from the Czar, and at once the Orloffs, Alexius and Gregory, left for St. Petersburg. Only Roop is here. I like Monsieur Roop," she added, breaking off, as it were, into a new line of thought. "He seems so thorough."

"Yes," said Saintonge grimly, "Roop is thorough; but you are to like no one but me. And what of the Empress?"

"She is frightened—No! not frightened, frightened is not the word; at least not the fright which means terror. She is anxious and strained. She sits alone and thinks, or whispers to Monsieur Roop, or breaks out into a burst of excited talk about nothing at all. To-day she is shut up in the pavilion, Mon Plaisir, where she sleeps, and is not to be disturbed by anyone."

"And what was the message from the Czar?"

"That he is coming to Peterhof to-morrow. You know it is his name-day."

"Name of the devil!" said Saintonge. "Sweet, I beg your pardon, but not even the society of an angel can make more than a man of me, and I am sure the Emperor will play us all some dog's trick one of these days. You say he is coming to Peterhof to-morrow? That explains everything. In what mood is he coming? Will the dog's trick be played to-morrow? He has thrust her out of the regency. Will he go a little further this time, just a little further, he who is autocrat and above the law? Thrice he has threatened—but he was drunk. This time he may be a little more drunken, and to repent when he is sober won't give back a life taken when his Divine Irresponsibility is drunk! Where is Roop now, I wonder?"

"Paul, is there really danger?"

They had been walking in the shaded garden, shut out from sight from every side, and turning to her, Saintonge caught her to his breast, so that her head lay back in the hollow of his arm.

"If I thought he would hurt you, nothing could stop me—nothing—nothing; and they might call it what name they chose."

For a moment she lay quiet, smiling up at him; then:

"Kiss me, Paul. That is better. I cannot bear to see such a look in your eyes; it is like murder. And did you really think I was afraid for myself? I was thinking of the Empress. There! Surely that is enough! When I said kiss me, I meant once, and not ten times. You will grow tired."

"God grant me a long life in which to see if I can grow weary," answered Saintonge. "Never once has my hunger been satisfied. But, dear, you are right; we must think of the Empress, and so I must see Roop."

CHAPTER XXX

ALEXIUS ORLOFF TAKES COMMAND

BUT Roop was shut up with Catherine in Mon Plaisir, and the July night had fallen to its slow dusk before he was free. To Saintonge, his observation sharpened by Ulrica's fears, it seemed that Roop shared the general uneasiness. He was taciturn, preoccupied, and so obviously averse from conversation that the little intervals of silence gradually lengthened until each sat mute. But though silent, Roop was not at rest. Every now and again he would rise and pace the length of the room up and down two or three times, then fling himself back in his chair in some fresh attitude. At last he leaned forward, and though the hour was late, there was still sufficient light in the sky to show the gravity of his face.

"I think the end is near," he said abruptly.

It was as if he assumed without doubt that their thoughts must have been on the same subject.

"What end?"

"That I cannot tell for certain, but by to-morrow night we shall know."

"Then there are alternatives?"

"There are always alternatives to those who conspire."

"What are they?" This time Saintonge did not challenge the word. The only question left unsettled was the scope of the conspiracy.

"Do you mean the immediate alternatives or the ultimate?"

"If the end is immediate," said Saintonge drily, "there can be no ultimate."

"The immediate will be forced to-morrow if the Czar grows violent; if to-morrow passes, the ultimate must be faced within a fortnight."

"Now I understand. And what are the immediate alternatives?"

"If we are attacked we shall defend ourselves. We may win, we may lose. If we lose I recommend you to follow Kasbek's way."

"You recommend me? Then I am included in the 'we'?"

"Certainly. From the very first, from the night I went to your lodgings, I made that clear."

"Then, *mon Dieu!* If I am included, why have I not been taken into confidence? Why have I not been told——"

"There was no need; you are to obey orders. No! Forgive me, Saintonge, I withdraw that. The time for saying that to you has passed—at least I think so, though I cannot be sure. If the need comes to use the word I must use it. The truth is, silence was the wish of the Empress. She thought it safer that you and Ulrica Khitrovin should know nothing."

"Safer?"

"Safer for yourselves, and for God's sake, Saintonge, don't let us have to pick and choose our words for fear of quarrelling."

"And has the time come for orders? No, I am not using the word offensively. I recognise that someone must command, and I would rather obey you than Orloff. Orloff is—well, too drastic for my taste. I really mean, has the time come to act?"

"To-morrow, when the Czar comes from Oranienbaum, anything may happen, and at all costs the Empress must be defended."

"And what of the Czarina's ladies?"

"The Empress comes first," replied Roop. "Remember that, Saintonge, the Empress must always come first. Honestly, I do not think her ladies are in danger. But with the Empress, with you, with the Orloffs, Panin, Bariatinski, Passek, myself—never mind our names—with us it is different."

"When you say the Empress must be defended, do you mean by force of arms?"

"I mean that if arrest is threatened, you must prevent it, even with your life."

"And if we lose?"

"Take Kasbek's way," answered Roop curtly. "The end is the same, and it is—cleaner."

Saintonge made no reply, and for a time there was silence. Now he understood the immediate alternative, and Roop was right—Kasbek's way was the best. Alexius Orloff, a man of simple words, and direct if drastic methods, had once sketched the only other choice open. "Better go to God like a gentleman," he had said, "than die by joints on the wheel." And yet it was not of either of these that Saintonge thought; it was, rather, that the Czar himself might, by some violent act, cleanse him of his scruples and enable him not only to obey orders, but to keep his word to the Empress and placate Laval with the one stroke. There is no murder in defending a woman at the cost of more lives than one's own, and the death of Peter was Catherine's most sure defence. Then he remembered that all this structure of possibility was founded on an "if."

"Supposing to-morrow passes?" he said.

"Then the ultimate alternative comes in ten days or a fortnight."

"And what is it?"

"Open revolution."

Quietness is a great power. If there was no hesitation in the reply, neither was there undue enthusiasm. Behind this quiet man, whom Ulrica Khitrovin knew

to be thorough, there were forces of a rising tide of which Breteuil had been conscious, but whose strength he could not measure. Nor could the word come upon Saintonge as a shock, though the acute crisis of any great event, even death itself, the expected and the inevitable, is never free from the element of surprise. Breteuil's guesses at the truth had prepared him, and Roop's more blunt outspokenness a month before had cleared the way to belief.

"Peter will be absent with the army," went on Roop in the same level voice. "We shall seize the regent and proclaim Catherine Empress in her own right. Panin, the Orloffs, Passek, are all with us. Even Vorontsof will be neutral; he does not love the Prussians."

"But the Czar, as you say, will have the army, and he will come back?"

"With the enemy in his rear? Let him attempt it! It has been all thought out. With the Danes behind him and we in front we should crush him as surely as one crushes——"

Roop paused, and through the grey dimness Saintonge saw him straighten himself in his chair, his head tilted to an attitude of listening. It was very late, or rather, early, and the night was absolutely still. St. Petersburg never slept, or, if it slept, it stirred uneasily in its dreams as one whose visions trouble the mind with that restlessness which may be born either of sorrowful memories or the dread of what a new day may bring. But here—in Peterhof—there had been no murmur of life, nothing to mar the quiet until now; and now, faint and confused, there came a sound of trotting horses, their hoof-beats muffled by the dust and the dull rumble of wheels.

The first thought, naturally, was of surprise. Peter, in his cunning, had pushed on the hands of the clock! But the alarm died in its birth. The horses were too few for such an attempt, three at the most, and even

while Saintonge groped for a better explanation, the sound ceased.

"The sentry does not challenge; he is one of us, whoever he is," said Roop, speaking very quietly, as men do who listen intently.

"Then wait here; they will tell him where you are," and presently there was the noise of heavy feet upon the stair, stumbling in their clumsy caution. With the same clumsy caution, more noisy than carelessness, the handle was turned and a man entered, closed the door behind him and stood with his back to it. It was Alexius Orloff.

"Who is there?" he said.

"Saintonge and Roop," answered Roop.

"Who else?"

"No one. Orloff, what has happened? Why are you here at this hour?"

"The deuce has happened," he answered, coming forward; and in the greyness his face was white with the dust from the roads. "Passek is arrested."

"Passek? When? Why?"

"This afternoon; and do you think I stopped to ask why? Pretty fools we would look going one by one to ask in our innocence why is Passek arrested. Von Korff would have penned us all like lambs for the butcher! No! I laid hands on a carriage with three good horses, and with Vasili Bibikof to drive, came here as fast as he could flog them."

"You would have come faster if you had ridden."

"And how would the Empress get back to Petersburg? Really, Roop, you men of great ideas very often do not see the little things which lie nearest. Do we want to rouse all Peterhof shouting for carriages and horses at this hour of the night? Do we want an express sent post-haste to the Czar by some of his creatures to say, 'The Empress has flown!' and so spoil everything?"

"What do you propose to do?"

"There is no proposing—I am going to do it now. If we can't blow up the mine with a long fuse we will with a short one. Surprise is our one hope. A good rule in a fight is this—when in danger, strike out! I am going to strike out. I am going to waken the Empress and drive her back to St. Petersburg as fast as the horses will take us."

"But nothing is ready; we must wait——"

"Wait till Passek has told everything and we are ruined? No! I won't wait an hour."

"But Passek will keep silence?"

"Bah, Saintonge! What do you know of our Russian ways? There must be, there can be, no delay."

"Perhaps you are right," answered Roop slowly. "Passek? Yes, Von Korff might make him talk; Von Korff has ways of his own. Poor devil! I would not blame Passek. Who knows you are here?"

"Gregory—Bariatinski—and—oh! they will tell the others. Roop, there is no time to be lost."

"Yes," said Roop again, but still slowly. "I think you are right; I shall go and order the escort."

But Orloff interposed unceremoniously.

"I'll have no escort. There will be just the Empress alone—and—yes, Saintonge, will you come with us? It's make or break now, the crown or Siberia; but you know that. Will you come?"

"Yes," said Saintonge, "I'll go. I can saddle my horse myself, and I promise you I'll make less noise than you did coming upstairs."

"Noise be hanged!" answered Orloff, stretching his huge bulk and laughing joyously. "I'm not exactly a ghost that I should walk like velvet."

"But the Empress cannot go alone," said Roop; "it would be madness."

"It's our one chance of safety," retorted Orloff.

"You men of clever policies don't know the people as I do, who drink with my soldiers and listen to their talk. If the Empress drives up with an escort it is three chances to one they'll say, 'This is war against the Czar!' and they won't move. But if she is alone, if she says, 'My children, I have need of you and who ever knew Catherine ungrateful?' it's an even chance they'll fling their hats in the air and shout 'God save the Empress!' Let them do that once and all's over; they will follow her then to the devil."

It was strange how their positions were reversed. Hitherto, behind the scenes, Roop had planned, foreseen, plotted, and Alexius Orloff had been content to move as the strings led him. Now, in an instant, the man of foresight and imagination was brushed aside by the man of action and simple, direct ideas. Nor did Roop resent the reversal of their parts. He had the power of self-effacement which is characteristic of strong men. That Choiseul had misjudged him, that Saintonge had treated him with open contempt, and that Gregory Orloff had bullied and hectored him mattered nothing, so long as events marched in their desired direction. It is such men who make conspiracies successful and turn revolt into revolution. Now he was even well content to obey.

"And what shall I do?"

"Stay here and keep us posted. We must know how the Czar acts when he arrives to-morrow—no, to-day, and finds there is no Empress to arrest. What o'clock is it?"

"Nearly four. Saintonge and I have been talking all night."

"Then I must waken the Empress. The horses will have had as long a rest as we dare give them. You had better come with me, Saintonge."

Saintonge turned to Roop.

"Have you any instructions?"

"None. I told you I hoped the day for orders had passed. Or, yes, there is this, if you can call it an instruction. The Czar is our great danger. Remember, Saintonge, we cannot afford to be sentimental."

CHAPTER XXXI

THE BID FOR EMPIRE

THE sun was already above the tree-tops when Saintonge and Orloff crossed the grass to the Dutch pavilion where Catherine was lodged. Both were well known, and Saintonge having given the password for the night, there was no opposition from the sentry.

"Who is the lady-in-waiting?" asked Orloff curtly.

"Mademoiselle Khitrovin, your Excellency."

"Then go and call her, and then let no one pass in or out without special permission."

"Mademoiselle Khitrovin knows nothing of—of all this," said Saintonge as they waited.

"That does not matter; she is shrewd and will not lose her head. I noticed that, when Gregory tried to—to—play the fool; that is the worst of Gregory, he will play the fool now and then. Here she is," and Ulrica Khitrovin entered.

She looked anxious rather than alarmed, but when she saw who was with Orloff the colour rushed to her cheeks and she drew her loose cloak yet more closely round her. Orloff wasted no time in explanations, but went straight to his point.

"Mademoiselle, I must see the Empress."

"But she is asleep; last night she sat up later than usual——"

"Then you must waken her."

From Orloff Ulrica looked at Saintonge, waiting.

"Yes," he said, "it is quite right. Orloff must see her."

"Ah ha!" cried Orloff. "Did I not do well to bring you with me! Already you give your orders! But all that will be changed later on. Quickly, please, Mademoiselle."

"Then wait here; I will bring her in a moment."

"No, no; we will go with you," and again Saintonge said, "Yes, 'tis quite right." He recognised that when a man of one idea has his mind made up argument is only a waste of time and breath.

Entering a room very softly, Ulrica Khitrovin shut the door behind her, only that it should be promptly opened again by Orloff in the pursuit of his one idea. The shutters were partly unclosed, the curtains half drawn, and, standing at the threshold, Saintonge saw a curious sight.

As the girl crossed the floor, stepping gently, Orloff passed her.

"I will waken her," he said in a loud whisper. "Have no fear; the Empress will understand and not be offended." And next moment he was stooping over the bed, which lay in partial shadow.

Laying his hand on Catherine's shoulder, Orloff shook her almost with roughness.

"Rouse yourself, Madame, rouse yourself!" he said sharply, and with a start the Empress sat up, her dark hair falling to her shoulders. Leaning on one elbow she passed the other hand with a rapid motion across her eyes, once, twice, thrice; then, still confused with sleep, looked at Orloff vacantly, and from him to the open door where Saintonge stood in the strong light of the passage.

"You—you?" she murmured inquiringly. "Alexius, what is it?"

It was characteristic that there was no trace of resentment at either the disturbance or intrusion. If Orloff broke in upon her at such an hour it was for some good reason; but neither was there any trace of

fear. Orloff's blunt answer was also characteristic. As with Ulrica, so now, there was no beating about the bush.

"Get up at once; we must act without delay, and all is ready for your proclamation."

"At once? To-day?" she answered. "What do you mean?"

"Passek is arrested; you must come at once."

By a thrust of her elbow she pushed herself more upright, until the laces of her nightdress showed waist high above the folds of the sheet, and with an impatient shake of the head flung the hair back from her face.

"Passek?" she repeated. "Passek arrested, and Passek knows everything? Ulrica, come and dress me. In ten minutes we can start."

And in ten minutes she found them in the passage where they waited. She had made no pretence at a toilet, but was dressed in the black gown she commonly wore, and even it was slovenly put on. If she was to be victorious in this battle for a crown, this struggle of life and death, with its desperate snatch at empire, it would be by no cunning wiles of a woman's art. Her white skin was even paler than usual, but her eyes were on fire, the strong mouth firmly set, and her every movement full of energy. Mademoiselle Khitrovin followed her into the passage.

"Madame, will you not eat something?"

"There is no time. I will breakfast in my capital, mine! or—eat no more," she added with a deepening of the voice.

But at the head of the stairs she turned and suddenly caught the girl in her arms.

"Kiss me, Ulrica, child. He must go with me; he is to be mine for a month, that is our bargain, but try and don't fret."

Kissing her on both cheeks, she held her in a close embrace for a moment, then ran lightly down the stairs;

and if the girl was frankly crying there was also a dimness veiling the fire of the elder woman's eyes. It was that touch of nature which was part of Catherine's greatness, the gracious womanliness of the woman wedded to, and interpenetrating, the strong virility and indomitable spirit of a man.

For a moment Saintonge lingered; he, too, had his good-bye to say.

"Roop stays here, and will take care of my beloved," he said, kissing her, but not on the cheeks, as Catherine had kissed her.

"And who will care for my beloved?" she cried. "God be with thee, my heart, God be with thee. Always He has cleared the way for us, and surely He will keep it, even now!" and with this message to take with him Saintonge was gone.

The coach which had brought Orloff from St. Petersburg had been drawn up opposite a side door opening upon a laneway, and Catherine was already seated when Saintonge reached the place. Her maid, warned by Roop, was with her, and Bibikof, who had driven from the capital with Orloff, was at the horses' heads while Orloff closed the carriage door.

"Where is your first relay?" asked Saintonge, as Orloff climbed into the driver's seat.

"Relays?" he answered, pausing. "Confound relays; I was in such a hurry to get here that I never thought of them."

"And if you break down?"

"We won't! We must not, we dare not. But if we do, by St. Michael! we'll carry her to Petersburg between us!"

He shouted, and at a crack of the whip the horses started, down came the whip on their backs in a vicious slash, and tired though they were, Orloff had them at the gallop before they had gone fifty yards.

Saintonge was not long in following, and passing the

swaying coach he rode ahead. To act as scout seemed wisest. Confession might already have been wrung from Passek by these little Russian ways which were strange to him, and Von Korff, acting on his own responsibility, have sent to arrest the Empress. But so far ahead as he could see the road was open, and he trotted back to find disaster already threatening. Though they were barely five miles from Peterhof, the horses were already in a lather of sweat, their heads drooping in fatigue, their gait no better than a lumbering trot, nor by oath or blows could Orloff force them to greater speed. Soon even this poor pace slowly slackened, and half-way to the capital the trot degenerated into a crawl.

"Give them breathing-time, or they will founder altogether," advised Saintonge.

"Damn breathing-time!" answered Orloff through his teeth, as he lashed the tired brutes savagely. "If Peter gets there first, what breathing-time will there be for any of us?"

At the fierce sting of the whip the horses again forced themselves into a shambling gallop, the coach groaning and jolting behind them as the wheels took the ruts of the uneven, dusty road. But it was their last effort; their powers were utterly spent, and thenceforward neither curses nor blows could urge them beyond a walk. Rising in his seat, Orloff beat their steaming flanks with his sword-flat, and would have stabbed them in his rage had not Catherine prevented him.

"No, no; they have done their best, the fault is not theirs," was all her comment; nor did she add any other reproach to that which was implied. "Ease them; it is all we can do."

Dismounting, Orloff took one by the head, Saintonge another, and so for a mile they tramped through the ankle-deep dust in silence. It was a strange procession this which marched to Empire, strange and forlorn,

surely one of the strangest ever seen ; a rutted, solitary road, three stumbling horses half held upon their feet by two weary men, grey-faced from dust, fatigue, and want of sleep ; a lumbering, mud-encrusted coach, with one stern-faced woman, black-robed, dishevelled, rigidly upright in her tense determination, and behind a single attendant with a serving-maid.

But relief was near. A peasant's wagon, loaded with farm-stuff for the city, came creaking down a cross-road, and before the driver's sleepy wits were well awake, the rope-traces were cut. To back his horses to the coach, replacing those cut loose by Saintonge, and yoke the latter's riding horse between the two, was a minutes' work. Nor had he rubbed the sleep from his eyes before Bibikof and the maid were again in their seats, with Orloff and Saintonge mounted on the box. Then shouting a cry of remonstrance he ran forward, but Orloff flicked him in the face with the whip and the coach started, leaving him in the middle of the road cursing beside the foundered horses.

This time if there was no great speed neither was there any longer a fear of collapse, and Orloff's spirits rose. There was no room for the philosophy of cheerfulness in defeat in his composition, and through the plodding of that last mile he had been absolutely silent.

" We shall win now," he said confidently, cracking his whip like a child ; " but every step I took back there in the ruts I felt the fall of the bar, and even with the sun in my face my blood ran cold."

" What bar ? "

" Did you never see it ? They tie you to a wheel with your limbs sprawled like the sails of a windmill, and every time a leg or an arm swings round they smash it with an iron bar—God ! it's horrible, and you don't die in a hurry ! But there'll be none of that, for we'll win now."

At a slow lumbering trot mile after mile was passed

without event, and at last yet further relief came. Gregory Orloff met them with fresh horses, this time the fastest the capital could produce, and Catherine changed into the new coach. Thenceforward their driving was the driving of Jehu, and by nine o'clock they were at Kalenkina. Here were the Ismailofski barracks where Alexius had spent his days sowing sedition, and here began the real struggle for the throne. As the coach slowed to a foot's pace Gregory Orloff leaped out. Running forward he cried, "The Empress! The Empress! Long live the Empress! Soldiers, shout for your Empress!"

But the cry fell flat. Little had been arranged, nothing fully prepared. The two or three dozen soldiers lounging at the barrack gates were unresponsive, while those who came rushing out in threes or fours at the cry stared and gaped in silence. Then, while the scales of Empire still trembled on the beam, Catherine sprang unaided from the coach, and all alone advanced towards the growing throng of men huddling doubtfully upon each other. The fuel of revolt was there, but it was cold. It must be fired, fired to passion, fired at any risk, however desperate, or she must fail. Saintonge would have joined her, but she motioned him back.

"I trust my children," she said loudly, using almost the very words Orloff had put into her mouth; "now and ever I trust my children as I know my children will trust me. Soldiers! The Empress has need of you!"

The words were accompanied by a fine dramatic gesture, at once an invocation, a plea for help, and a command. There is nothing so fickle as humanity in the bulk. The Empress trusted them! The Empress had need of them! Out of all Russia the Empress came to them in her need, to them! to them! Would they help her? By God! they would!

There was an instant's pause, a pause in which the history of a nation stood still, uncertain which way to

turn ; but only for an instant ; then, like the children she had called them, they crowded round her with a rush. " Matyushka ! Matyushka ! Mother ! Mother ! " they shouted. Like children they flung their caps in the air, like children they kissed her hands, her skirt, the sleeve of her robe, the very dust she had trodden upon. The scale of revolution had fallen, and Peter was the lighter in the balance.

Again the coach creaked on, this time to the pace of a marching regiment, and the music of many feet. Before and behind tramped the Ismailofski guards, their colonel at their head ; it was the throwing down of the gage of Empire. The men were jubilant, singing and shouting as they marched, but Catherine's stern face, as she sat alone and upright in the coach, never relaxed. The gage was flung down, but victory was yet to win, and as they approached the capital there came news of a check. The Preobrajenski regiment, drawn up in the line of advance before the Church of Our Lady of Kazan, was in arms for the Czar. For a moment there was confusion, some advising this, some that—retreat, advance, pourparlers ; but, characteristically, Catherine took command without hesitation, and her wisdom was the prudence of courage.

" Set the coach in the van and move forward," she ordered. " Let us see if they will fire upon their Empress."

So, through a city of quiet, where the common folk, the chattels of Empire, the noughts behind the cipher which give it value, went their placid ways, unconscious that a woman's hands, at a desperate risk, were wrenching the reins of power from the feeble grasp of their Czar, the coach crawled forward. If any recognised Catherine they fell upon their knees as she passed, as was their wont ; but the significance of the disordered procession escaped them. The Emperor loved to have soldiers around him, why not the Empress ? There was

no commotion, no excitement, as, turning to the left from the Moscow gate, they passed the Church of the Trinity, and by a curve on the right crossed the canal to the southern angle of the great square, where stands the Cathedral Church of Our Lady of Kazan. The Empress had returned to the capital, that was all.

At the point where the street debouches from the square, Bibikof, who now held the reins, would have halted. But Catherine sternly bade him drive on, and the very boldness of the advance paralysed attack. As fire fights fire until both are consumed, so regiment would have fought regiment without the hesitancy of a thought; but this almost solitary woman, guarded by only two or three dust-sown men, was an undreamed-of enemy. Had Simon Vorontsof, who commanded the Preobrajenskis, had the boldness of his ambitions for his sister Elizabeth, he would have advanced alone and arrested the Empress. But he wavered in doubt, and while he wavered Catherine sprang from the coach and walked briskly forward, unattended.

"Who is on my side? Who?"

For a moment, when all men held their breath, there was no response to her appeal, no movement but that uneasy stir of massed men, uncertain which way to turn and wanting guidance. Then one man, one single man, broke the ranks and ran forward, flinging his hat in the air as he ran. It was the sergeant whom Peter had degraded, he who had kissed Catherine's hand on the day of Kasbek's death. She was right; he had not forgotten, and now he paid his debt.

"God save the Empress!" he cried, falling on his knees at her feet. "Long live the Empress Catherine."

"Thanks!" she answered, her voice filling the silent square. "My friend, tell me your name."

"Gourief."

"Then rise, Captain Gourief. The Empress never forgets her friends and never forsakes them!"

Again there was a hush as Catherine's gaze, magnetic with excitement, left the upturned face and swept the ranks before her. The promise was not for Gourief alone. Out went her arms in the same dumb invocation and command. This time the gesture was as a spark to a train of gunpowder. The ranks confronting her shook as corn shakes in the wind, then a shout went up as of one voice : " Long live the Empress ! Long live the Empress Catherine ! " and at the cry her nerve broke. Tears ran from her eyes in flood, and if the arms were again extended it was no longer in invocation, but the mother taking the children to her heart.

The revolution was over, and it was well for Peter and his Holsteiners that they were at Oranienbaum. Only Vorontsof and his major, Voieikof, refused to join in the acclamation. Snapping their swords across, they flung them on the ground and stood sullenly aside while their men clustered round Catherine as bees cluster round their queen. Thence to the Cathedral of Our Lady of Kazan was but a step, and from the altar the Church set its seal upon her proclamation. Within three days Peter had abdicated and was a prisoner in Ropsha.

But Laval was not satisfied.

" What is done can be undone," he said sourly. " What if the Czar comes back ? "

" He can be deported."

" Deported ? I tell you, Paul, there is but one frontier the Czar cannot cross." Then, after a pause, he added, both face and voice full of a sinister significance, " You have still ten days before I leave St. Petersburg."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE MESSAGE OF A BROKEN FAN

IN this story of the pursuit of the Golden Shoes there is no room for the many events crowded into the few days which immediately followed Catherine's seizure of Empire. History deals with them, and here they are unnecessary. But there is this to be said—through these days the hand which grasped the sceptre with so unshakable a hold had no stain of blood upon it. Then—it was on a Saturday—Alexius Orloff, the man of simple ideas and direct acts, rode out to Ropsha at a yet more furious pace than he had driven to Peterhof.

It was Roop who brought the news, Peter Paul Roop, that is. Of Anton, the ex-valet, Saintonge had seen nothing since the day of Laval's arrival in the capital, nor had he made any determined attempt to find him. With the telling of the whole truth the half lie had been counteracted, and the man's power to hurt was gone.

"At one time I thought of sending you with Orloff," Peter Paul said to Saintonge. "You brought the Empress to St. Petersburg, and it would be only your due that you should see the end."

"The end? What end?"

"Of a dynasty," replied Roop, and while he spoke there came a knock at the door. It was the concierge.

"Your pardon, Excellencies," he said apologetically. "I would not have disturbed you, but this has just come," and he handed a small package to Saintonge.

It was without address, but "In great haste" was written on the cover in both Russian and French.

"Who brought it?"

"The messenger is below, Excellency. I do not know him."

"Tell him to wait. What do you mean, Roop?"

"He means," answered Laval, speaking with an exultant ring in his voice as the door closed, "that Orloff—God speed him!—will put the Czar across the frontier. Paul, I wish it had been you. That would be an earning of wages indeed!"

"I do not quite follow Monsieur de Laval's allusion," said Roop, "but, all the same, I think he has caught my meaning. It is the best thing for us all."

"To see the end?" repeated Saintonge, indignant in his comprehension. "And you would have sent me?"

"If needful, yes. I told you the time might never come for orders; yet it would have come to-day but for Alexius Orloff."

"And it is not too late," cried Laval, leaning forward suddenly, his face flushed with passion and one shaking hand outstretched in the eagerness of his emphasis. "Follow him, Saintonge, follow him. Ride like hell and catch him up. There's time still, and I bid you. Go with him, see there is no blunder, no failure, no—no—damned squeamish mercy. I can't trust Orloff. These big men are sometimes as soft as a woman. Mercy? What mercy would he and his Cossacks have on the women and children of France? Every night as I lie awake I hear the tramp of the marching feet, and I have seen war. Lust, sack, devilment; that's what your Czar stands for. Follow him, Paul, follow Orloff and make sure, for, my God, yes! I have seen war. What is that in your hand?"

As Saintonge listened to the outburst he had, half mechanically, unfolded the packet, and now stood

looking doubtfully at its contents. It was the fan Ulrica Khitrovin had snapped across and flung from her on the night of the ball. Now, without a word, she had sent it to him, or, no! not without a word, for there were these three—"In great haste!" For a moment he turned it over in silence, then he held it out.

"You see for yourself," he said.

"A woman's fan? Saintonge, what does that mean?"

"I think," said Roop slowly, his eyes fixed on Saintonge's perplexed face, "I have seen Mademoiselle Khitrovin with just such a fan."

"Mademoiselle Khitrovin?" Laval sank back on his cushions and then again leaned forward. His face was still flushed with passion, but his eyes were grey and lustreless. "You can choose," he said coldly.

Then Roop spoke. Perhaps he guessed that the broken fan was something more than a love-token.

"Monsieur de Saintonge, the time has come for orders. You are to follow Orloff at once—at once, and——" he paused a moment, searching for a word as little gross, as little offensive, as might be, "and assist him in—everything."

"Why not say—murder?"

"It is not I who speak, it is Monsieur de Choiseul."

Again there was a pause, and through the stillness Saintonge looked from one to the other, from Roop, angry and suspicious, to the implacable hard face of Laval set in its senile, sinister determination, then to the toy in his hand with its splintered ivory, its torn laces, its subtle faint perfume suggestive of the joys of life, and its pregnant message of undeclared need—"In great haste!" Without reply he turned to the door.

"Saintonge—Paul, where are you going?"

"To her—first."

"And then?" But the door was shut.

"Damn all women!" said Laval, and fell back in his chair.

In the hall Dmitry was waiting. Saintonge knew it would be Dmitry, but he wasted no time seeking explanations.

"Where is Mademoiselle?"

"At the palace, Excellency."

"It was she who sent you to me?"

"Yes, Excellency. 'Be quick, Dmitry,' she said, 'very quick.'"

"Is she well?"

"Yes, Excellency, but I think she is troubled."

"Follow me and wait."

"I have my orders already, Excellency."

At the door a carriage was in readiness. Saintonge paused with his foot on the step. A carriage? That gave him only seven minutes in which to think, but already he was beginning to see his way. Not that a plan had sprung suddenly to life, Minerva-like, fully equipped in all details. In the emergencies of life a man must be content to deal with details as they arise, they are beyond provision, and it is sufficient for the moment that the main point is clear. He had made up his mind to follow a policy rather than a plan, and the advantage was that a policy compromises upon details whereas a plan is rigid. Nor was the policy original; it has been followed by humanity ever since man was—and knew the value of caution. Avoid extremes, that was the policy. He would go to Ropsha, that would please Laval, but he would arrive too late. That would avoid—but it was easy to see what that would avoid, though not even to himself did he care to put it into words. There are few men who, in the weakness of our nature, have not at some time or other sought to walk arm in arm with both heaven and hell; usually they fail, and then the latter claims companionship. That—the going to Ropsha with little haste and a great show of speed—

would be after he had seen Ulrica. To give him his due Ulrica came first, and why she wanted him he could not guess.

At the palace gates Dmitry leaped out ahead of Saintonge.

"Your Excellency, Mademoiselle is waiting in her apartments," he said, and ran off without waiting for any response. Later on Saintonge remembered that he had said he had his orders.

In her apartments? That was both new and strange, and argued secrecy as well as great haste. Never before had he been admitted to her apartments. From the vaguely defined future policy Saintonge turned his thought abruptly to the concrete claims of the present need, groping for a clue. The fan? Orloff! The association of ideas was instant and disquieting. Orloff was in greater favour than ever and more insolent in power. For the moment, and especially while Peter lived, he was indispensable. Without him and his three brothers, with their regiments behind them, Catherine could hardly have held her place. Had he, in the insolence of authority, and presuming upon Catherine's necessity, thrust his importunities yet more rudely upon Ulrica? Was the palace to him but another Dolgoburg? Then, by God! swore Saintonge, his nerves tingling, his teeth set, Catherine or no Catherine: Laval or no Laval: France or no France—and with the oath half registered he found himself at her door.

It was more than half open, nor was there need to knock. She had recognised his footstep—the ear of love soon learns the trick of sound—and was waiting for him, her face full of the trouble Dmitry's watchfulness had seen. When the heart is touched the eyes of the peasant are as keen as those of the prince.

"Dear, you have need of me?" He held her in his arms as he spoke, but though she met his kiss it was for the first time without warmth, without response.

"I have always need of you, but to-day more than ever. Monsieur Orloff——"

"Orloff? Has Orloff dared——"

"No, no, it is not what you think. But Alexius Orloff has gone to Ropsha and I am afraid."

Ropsha! Almost insensibly the clasp of Saintonge's arms slackened. Out of all the world Ulrica was the last person whom he desired to know of Ropsha, and of what might happen there.

"Afraid? Why should you be afraid, and of what?"

"I am afraid for the Czar."

"But there is no Czar."

"Paul! Paul!" As his clasp had slackened hers grew firmer, stronger, more tense, and yet it was not the warm clasp of the woman who loves. "Do not fence words with me, do not pretend you misunderstand me. Or, if I am wrong, tell me and I will believe you. Why has Alexius Orloff gone to Ropsha?"

For a moment Saintonge made no answer. Her very simplicity of faith disarmed evasion. It often happens that surrender is a woman's surest method of success. An indignant protest, a bitter denunciation, he might have met by a quibble justified by the conscience of the age because of all that was at stake, but what lie, however garbed in subterfuge, could meet such trust? And yet, that he might gain time, he evaded a direct reply.

"Tell me why you are afraid?"

"I heard—overheard——" she paused, then broke out, "Paul, Paul, I could not help hearing, they spoke so loud."

"I know, dear; go on, who were they, and what did they say?"

"Gregory and Alexius. It was Gregory's voice and they were alone. The Empress, he said, had told him that in Russia queens could marry subjects. You cannot think how horribly he said it, but, Paul, she meant nothing. Day and night, almost, I have been with her

for six months, and I know her as only one woman can know another, and she meant nothing—nothing at all. I am sure of that, quite sure."

"The Empress is not easy to know," answered Saintonge with a little hardening of the voice as he remembered how she had played with him. A man finds it hard to forgive being made a fool of—even for his own good.

"She is not like my very dear, transparent, ingenuous, single-minded——"

"Oh, never mind me. Paul, do you think she meant—— No! it is too horrible; I cannot believe it and I will not."

"And you are right not to believe," answered Saintonge. "But never mind that now. What did Alexius say?"

"That there is no use climbing a ladder until there is room on top. Room on top! We know what he meant by that. That was this morning, and when I heard where he had gone in such a hurry, I sent for you."

"Why?" Already he guessed why, but to ask the question gained time.

"I thought you might—I made sure you would interfere."

"Interfere?"

She paused, and shook a little as if a shiver of cold passed through her.

"Interfere to prevent murder."

"Dear, you do not understand—everything."

"I understand enough; it is murder."

"Peter is half-brained, irresponsible, absolutely dangerous. Three times he has threatened the Empress."

"I know, but—it is murder."

"His life is a menace to us all; while he lives there is no safety for the Empress—for you—for me."

"Does that make it less than—murder?"

"If he lives there will be civil war. Better one man should die——"

"Paul, Paul, if Orloff kills him to-day, is it not murder?"

"If Peter is again Czar, think of France."

"I know, I know, and yet I can think of nothing but my husband's honour."

"Dear, what would you have me do?"

"Save him, Paul, save him. And who can do it so well as you? Who has a greater right than you? Alexius owes you a life, you are Catherine's friend, you who stood beside her in the Kazan Square. Oh! I have been so proud of you these days; make me prouder still. I cannot believe the Empress knows, but if she does, save him, Paul, and give her time to think, time to see this is a crime against heaven, a crime against her own great name. Paul, Paul, if you do that you will be yet more her friend than you were at Peterhof. Save her, Paul, save her from this wickedness! Oh! I do not believe she consents, but for honour's sake, for love's sake, for my sake—ah! Paul, I think there would always be a red cloud between us two."

She paused, pushing him to arm's length as her eyes grew moist and her mouth tremulous in the passion of her appeal. But only for an instant, then Saintonge drew her to him, his arms close about her.

"Never anything between us two," he said, and kissed her gently. "Sweetheart, God be praised for good women who save men from themselves! We shall be very poor, you and I. There will be no Laval, none of all that gracious dignity my darling would become so well. But love wears shoes of gold, and we will not feel the roughness of the way and we shall be together! That makes up for all—we shall be together. Yes! I will go to Ropsha and I will do all a man can do. Kiss me once more, my heart."

"My king!" she said, her eyes shining though the lips which touched his still shook a little. Then—"Dmitry is waiting with the horses."

"Dmitry?"

"I knew you would go," she answered. "I was sure you would when you understood, and so I told him to be ready. God send you may be in time!"

God send you may be in time! There was much need for the prayer, and, avoiding the main approach, Saintonge, for greater haste, ran down the narrow stairway which Catherine had shown him on the day of Kasbek's death and so out to the river-side by a postern. There Dmitry waited him, a bridle in either hand, and without a word Saintonge swung himself into the saddle. But as he gathered up the reins the peasant pushed a pistol-butt into his grip.

"You may need it, Excellency." Then he added earnestly, "You remember Dolgoburg? What I said then I say to-day: my life is yours when you need it, yours and hers; you know that?"

"And mine is hers no less. Yes, I believe you, Dmitry. Now mount and let us go."

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE CZAR CROSSES THE FRONTIER

OF that day's ride and what followed it, Saintonge never spoke at length. Of the first there was perhaps little to be said. The road in part was the same as to Peterhof, and once clear of the city there was, there could be, no sparing of the horses. Ambition rides with a sharp spur, nor cares how cruelly it is reddened, and Orloff had two hours' start of them—God send they might be in time!

Neither spoke. Dmitry kept his place a little in Saintonge's rear, but near enough to escape his dust. The peasant had wound a gay barbaric scarf round his waist, its fringed ends dangling to his thigh, as if he rode to a feast, and into this he had pushed a huge two-barrelled pistol. Across his back was slung his only other weapon, a wooden club three feet in length, iron shod and studded with inch-long iron spikes projecting, tooth-like, from the head. It looked exceedingly ancient, the close-grained wood toughened by age. No doubt it had come down from father to son for many wild generations, with a tale of life taken for every bristling spike. It was a terrible weapon in such strong hands as Dmitry's.

When Saintonge, looking back, caught his eye, he smiled and nodded like a big, cheerful child, but otherwise his face was placidly grave. Whither they were bound, on what service, or what the end might be, he did not know. Mademoiselle had said, "Ride with his

Excellency, obey him in all things, and take care of him for my sake," and for answer Dmitry had kissed her hand. She understood, and there was no need for words; but since he was to take care of his Excellency he bethought himself of the pistols and his club with the iron spikes. His idea of "taking care" was not one of pure passivity. But once they were on the road he ceased to trouble himself with thought; he left that to his Excellency, and Saintonge, showing his horse no mercy beyond the mercy of sparing him, so that the last ounce of strength might be drawn from his limbs, thought for both.

This was farewell to the Laval Golden Shoes, that much was certain. "Ride like hell to help Orloff," said Laval, and here he was riding like hell's master to hinder him at the bidding of the woman Laval contemned. For such an offence as that there was no forgiveness. Leaning forward, he stroked his horse's neck, patting it: "So! lad! steady now, steady, steady," and so drove him on a little faster. Then there was Catherine? She would keep her promise to France, he believed, for that was policy, but personally this would ruin him. To have Peter cleared from her path against her will was very desirable, and if her mouth thanked Saintonge for his intervention, her brain and her heart would curse his meddling. No! he could hope for nothing from Catherine. Both as woman and Empress she had everything to gain by Peter's death. Ulrica? Ah! Ulrica! She was right, eternally right. This was sheer murder, gloss it with expediency how they might. God be praised for good women, and God send they would be in time! So the miles flew by and the hours crawled. Then—Ropsha!

On, round the lake, slackening nothing of his speed, galloped Saintonge, but as they entered the ill-kept park he beckoned Dmitry to close up with him. It was time to have some understanding between them.

"Do you know why we are here?"

"No, Excellency." But as he answered Dmitry unslung the great club and laid it on the saddle before him. If he did not know, he guessed it was not for pleasure.

"It is that I may see Monsieur Orloff at once, and I think he is in the Château. Now, these—you see the soldiers there on the terrace? They may try to prevent me. If they do we must force an entrance; do you understand?"

"Yes, Excellency, that will be easy," and Dmitry ran his fingers between the spikes, smiling cheerfully.

"Easy, if they don't shoot," replied Saintonge.

But they did not, nor at the door was there any opposition. Saintonge was well known as a friend of both Orloff and the Empress, and besides—what could two men do against so many? So they dropped their reins where their horses stood, panting, and ran up the steps unmolested.

"Where is Monsieur Orloff?"

"With the—the Czar."

"And where is the Czar?"

"There, in that room—the fourth door."

"Good. You men can wait outside on guard. Come, Dmitry," and again Saintonge ran forward.

But from one of the intervening doorways an officer of grenadiers looked out, then sprang into the passage at a leap, his arms stretched to their widest.

"No one passes."

"Nonsense; I must see Orloff."

"These are his orders: no one passes."

"But you know me—Saintonge?"

"Yes, but——"

"Then I must pass," and with a swing Saintonge sent him staggering aside, and at last the path was clear.

But as the path cleared there came from that fourth room a cry, one only, no articulate word, no call for

help, only a shriek, a scream, the awful rending of a soul's agony in violent dissolution. Once before, in the snow, Saintonge had heard just such a cry.

"God in heaven! They are killing the Czar! Dmitry! Dmitry! Come! Come!"

But even as he raced forward, shouting, the way was again closed. The fourth door opened for an instant and three men slipped out; then it was closed from behind with a crash. Of the three one was Anton Roop. Already there was a scuffle of feet in his rear, and without a word Saintonge thrust at the nearest of those in front, overreached himself in his haste and fell.

With a stride Dmitry stood across him.

"Lie still, Excellency, lie still; I have my orders."

There was a sweep of the great club in a curve from right to left, the flash of a sword caught unheeded on the unused arm, a sweep from left to right, a downward whirl, a brief tumult of cries, God! Damnation! and from a floor already slippery with blood Saintonge scrambled to his feet. Obeying a blind instinct he flung open the fourth door to meet Alexius Orloff face to face. He was ghastly pale, his eyes round and staring, his long hair flying in disorder, his cheeks scored as if by finger-nails, the blood running in narrow trickles to his chin, and he staggered, groping his way like a man too dazed to see a yard before him. As he recognised who it was who met him he thrust out his hands as if to push him back, then let them fall to his sides dangling.

"Too late, Saintonge, too late!" and he gulped for breath, choking.

"The Czar?"

"Dead—dead. She may—do with me—what she likes—but he's dead." He paused, gasping. "I never thought—he had so much—life in him."

"Dead? Orloff, are you certain?"

"Don't I look—certain? But you can make—sure

for yourself. Dead! My God! Yes! he's dead. It was like—killing a cat—with your hands."

He turned away shivering, and leaned against the wall sobbing with excitement. Slowly Saintonge moved forward; the need for haste was gone. Peter lay upon his bed, the eyes staring, starting from the swollen discoloured face; the mouth was open as if it still uttered that last terrible cry. From what lay upon the bed Saintonge looked mechanically round the room. It was in wild disorder, chairs toppled, the cloth dragged from the table, the remains of a meal scattered and trodden upon the floor through a litter of broken glass. Beside the bed lay a napkin twisted to a rope. The blinds were drawn down that none without might see through the windows. Three soldiers of the Guards, one a sergeant, were with Orloff in the room. Round the door, but beyond it, was half a ring of curious frightened faces with Dmitry in the forefront, blood dripping from the fingers of his felt hand. The great club was stained to the wrist-thong.

Lifting Peter, Saintonge laid him upon his back, straightened the limbs and drew the coverlid over the horror of his face. Then he turned to the door, looking neither to right or left.

"Dmitry, can you ride?"

"Yes, Excellency. It is nothing but the left arm."

"Then let us go." And they went, no man hindering them.

In the passage the three lay where Dmitry had stretched them, Roop face upwards, ghastly with a crushed skull. Slowly they mounted, slowly they rode away. Suddenly Saintonge had grown very tired, and the sober pace of the weary horses rested him. Presently, at the first posting-house, they procured relays, ate a little, drank more, and Dmitry washed both wounds and club. Presently, too, as they rode on, Orloff passed them, galloping furiously; nor, soberly

though they rode, was it dusk when Saintonge reached the palace.

Once again Ulrica was waiting for him.

"I have failed," he said bitterly. "I think I am born to failure; but, beloved dear, ask me no questions. The Czar is dead."

"No failure," she answered proudly. "The measure of a man is his effort and not his success."

Then he told her of Laval, and of the Roop who was yet alive, saying nothing of him who was dead. Told her of Laval's fixed purpose and of the bait he had held out; told her, even, how he had meant to win both her and it, cheating the devil in the dark.

"And so, beloved, I come to you as you to me, with no possession but our love."

"You put all that aside," she said, her eyes shining; "these Shoes of Gold, as you call them, you put aside for honour and for me, and yet call yourself a failure?"

"To be poor is to fail."

"That is the world's lie," she answered hotly, then added, with a wistful softening of the voice, "but the loss? It—it grieves you?"

"I love the place—Laval, love it for itself; and the worth of the whole world would not be too much to pour into my dear's lap."

"Let us try to save it; let me try to save it; perhaps he will listen."

"He will listen to nothing," said Saintonge. "I know him; he is a Laval."

"Then do not thou be a Laval too," she answered, kissing him, "but give me my own way."

And what could Saintonge do but consent? Surely, if Laval was to be moved at all, Ulrica would move him?

So they drove together through the streets in the growing coolness of the evening, speaking little from the very fullness of their hearts, and Tantet, hearing the sound of their feet, met them at the stairhead. His

cheerful face was graver than usual, but there was just the faintest show of light in his shrewd eyes.

"Monsieur le Count," he said, bowing ceremoniously; "I have the honour to inform you that Monsieur de Laval died this evening." Then his voice dropped to a whisper. "The joy of the Czar's death killed him, and, Monsieur Paul! Monsieur Paul! there is no new will."

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